Surrogate Memory: A Leadership Remembering a Revolution for Egyptians

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Abstract

On January 25, 2011, a momentous event in Egyptian history began. An uprising occurred with Egyptians demanding the removal of then-president Hosni Mubarak who had been the country's leader for nearly three decades. Worsening political and civil issues over the previous few years of his presidency that culminated in these series of protests included high levels of corruption, lack of political freedom, lack of freedom of speech, extreme police brutality, and low worker salaries. Although Mubarak eventually stepped down, the shortage of long-term political success that the revolution had was astounding. It is important to describe how the current Egyptian government utilizes the revolution's memory as an instrument for consolidating power and altering the revolution's original meaning. Relying on theories and concepts of collective memory posed by the collective memory theorists Yael Zerubavel, the Popular Memory Group, and Eric Hobsbawm, this is possible. Under focus will be the various commemorative forms being attacked by the government, the attempted transformation of citizens into those dependent on the ruling for acceptable collective memory, and the dominant narrative of the revolution that has been prescribed. Taking a glimpse at Egypt's political and social climate after the revolution is also crucial. Detailing this 'hijacking' of the revolution illustrates not only how pivotal collective memory is to individual thought, but also how a seemingly innocuous phenomenon can be weaponized so readily.

Introduction

On the 25th of January 2011, a momentous event in Egyptian history began. An uprising occurred with Egyptians demanding the removal of then-president Hosni Mubarak who had been the country's leader for nearly three decades. Worsening political and civil issues over the previous few years of his presidency that culminated in these series of protests included high levels of corruption, lack of political freedom, lack of freedom of speech, extreme police brutality, and low worker salaries. In this two-week period citizens, primarily in Cairo, participated in demonstrations, marches, strikes, and civil resistance to make their voices heard. Mubarak made several attempts to quell the protestors such as shutting off internet access and paying his supporters to attack Tahrir Square in an event dubbed 'The Battle of the Camel' (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). Security forces and police were regularly manoeuvred to quash protestors, leaving hundreds killed. These efforts Mubarak alternated with endeavours to appease. This included the dismissal of much of his cabinet, his first appointment of a vice president, and an announcement of abstaining from re-election at the end of his term. Turnouts for these protests were considerable, and the people proved steadfast. On February 11, 2011, they were successful, and Mubarak stepped down handing power to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF).

After the Egyptian people demonstrated their mettle, slowly the revolution began losing significance for Egypt's rebirth as a democratic and developing society. Mubarak would be put on trial for corruption and the

killing of hundreds of protestors with an initial sentence of life in prison (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). The Muslim Brotherhood—an organization based on Islamism and granted entry into politics—reserved candidate Mohammed Morsi to become the first Egyptian president to come to power through an election. Meanwhile, violence against the population orchestrated by the army was still occurring exemplified by the Maspero massacre and the Battle of Mohamed Mahmoud Street. A year after Morsi took office in 2012, little had changed. Police violence was still rampant, reforms were nonexistent, and power cuts became a regular occurrence (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). A new movement began on June 30, 2013, with the express demand for Morsi's removal. A handful of days later, defense Minister Abdel Fattah el-Sisi removed Morsi from power and eventually imprisoned him in Tora prison, where he would later die. The Muslim Brotherhood was shortly afterward labelled a terrorist organization by Egypt, and General el-Sisi won a new presidential election in 2014 with 96.9 percent of the vote. Mubarak's case is subject to a retrial which eventually results in him being officially released from prison.

The shortage of long-term political success that the revolution had was astounding. It was scarcely surprising the circular route that Egypt has taken given how much influence the Egyptian military has had on the political scene since the British left the country officially in the 1950s. Ever since then, the army and its most prominent figures have had a strong grip on discourse in the country. By making note of the significance of the June 30th revolution against Morsi as a continuation of the January 25 revolution, the armed forces were then capable of reinterpreting the revolution's memory to suit their needs socially and politically (Van de Bildt, 2015). Tampering with the narrative that surrounded the revolution enabled them to reinstate the army as a sacred entity in the country, validate their candidate's right to power, and smother the people's collective memory of the revolution in various ways. Particularly instrumental in this was the demonization of the then-ruling Muslim Brotherhood which had democratically come to power (Van de Bildt, 2015; Abd el-Fattah, 2022). Possessing a monopoly over mediums of authority impacting memory, such as the new constitution, certainly played their part as well.

It is important to describe how the current Egyptian government utilized the January 25 revolution's memory as an instrument for consolidating power and altering the revolution's original meaning. Relying on theories and concepts of collective memory posed by the collective memory theorists Yael Zerubavel, the Popular Memory Group, and Eric Hobsbawm, this is possible. Under focus will be the various commemorative forms being attacked by the government, the attempted transformation of citizens into those dependent on the ruling for acceptable collective memory, and the dominant narrative of the revolution that has been prescribed. Taking a glimpse at the political and social climate in Egypt after the revolution is crucial as well. Detailing this 'hijacking' of the revolution illustrates not only how pivotal the collective memory is on individual thought but also how a seemingly innocuous phenomenon can be weaponized so readily.

A Particular Type of Reminiscence Subject to Obscurity

Since the 25th of January revolution, many actors have looked to consolidate it in the national memory. Some believe that physical sites such as Tahrir Square in Cairo are memorial sites that are a significant part of the identities of Egyptians and what they strived for over the two weeks. The government has made several attempts varying in success to thwart these commemorative efforts. The Popular Memory Group (1997) has a concept that fits this situation well called the "social production of memory" (254). The popular memory is facilitated heavily by history writing for it is an integral part of politics. In the social production of memory "everyone participates, though unequally" (The Popular Memory Group, 1997, 254). What is important in the context of Egypt is the "public representations" of the national past and the "competing constructions of the past" that refer to the 25th of January revolution (254-255). That is where a dominant memory is derived and where the memory of the June 30th revolution is commemorated as a day for the army rather than for the entire nation.

A key source of the historical constructions of the revolution is the street art that is in cities in Egypt namely Cairo. The graffiti that is pervasive throughout the city depicts iconic images and figures of the revolution through the use of size, colours, and shapes.

An example of an iconic image related to the revolution is the woman with the blue bra; this particular woman had been a part of a planned sit-in in Tahrir Square on December 17, 2011 (Linssen, 2018). The woman was part of a group of protestors that had been sectioned off by security officers and would set the scene for her being subjected to extreme violence. The woman was dragged from her garment until it was pulled over her head until her brassiere was exposed by two soldiers moving her unconscious body with one assaulting her simultaneously. The image was captured by an independent photographer but garnered enough attention to be featured on popular news networks like CNN and Al Jazeera. Citizens and outlets alike were able to exhibit the violence that citizens were so often met with when resistance to authorities was detected. The image also provided fuel for the women's movement in Egypt. The incident exposed the experiences of dehumanization and objectification that women were typically subjected to in Egyptian society. Three days after the incident, the number of women in Tahrir Square was higher with some women brandishing the image (Linssen, 2018). While the incident did not happen in the initial period of the revolution, it remains a symbol of the revolution illustrating the people's condition prior to and after the 25th of January. Critical for the image's lifespan, promptly following the incident was the image's reproduction in street art.

Bahia Shehab, a Cairene street artist, created a stencil of a bright blue bra to commemorate the image of the woman with the blue bra (Linssen, 2018). Shehab cites facilitating the collective remembrance of the incident and the real circumstances surrounding the event as her motivation. Her work with the blue bra even supersedes the stencil as she incorporates it in one circumstance into a version of Supergirl in a vivid blue outfit with the Arabic letter 'tha' referring to the word 'thawra'–revolution–off to the side (Linssen, 2018). Through images like this in suburbs like Heliopolis, a dialogue among the Egyptian people remains open. People remember. They remember their morals, their strife, and the treatment they are forced to tolerate. Mediums like this have fundamental differences from ones with more traditional historical or intellectual authority. Graffiti is associated with vandalism, but it still has unique capabilities. Graffiti can generate conversation between the artist and the average citizen. By having

reminders in the very streets of the revolution the resistance is reignited. When people see the graffiti, they know they are listening to someone who is still resisting authority. In a way, the revolution is still ongoing and has people echoing its ideas despite oppression. Graffiti may even border more on private memory, producing a sense of the past given how much less social currency is placed upon it (The Popular Memory Group, 1997, 254). In an Egyptian context, that becomes vital to separating the voice of the government from that of revolutionaries. A persuasive alteration in collective memory, though, needs to be comprehensive, covering all domains. That means accounting for these less formal contexts, and the government has a history of doing this.

Controlling the lower arenas of national memory has proven difficult. Various beautification projects by privately led entities were set to add their artwork to the streets with the approval of authorities after the 2013 military coup (Aamiry-Khasawnih & Galan, 2022). Two particular projects–WOW Unchained and Calligraphy Nefertiti—put artwork on walls in Cairo in proximity to revolutionary artwork, obscuring it in the process. The artists involved in the projects were also not from Egypt. These would be on the walls of streets that had significance for the revolution like Mohamed Mahmoud Street. Local resistance to the projects was instantaneous. Calligraphy Nefertiti's resultant works were described by people as meaningless and an attempt to erase the memory of January 25th (Aamiry-Khasawnih & Galan, 2022). Independent artists also took direct action against the works themselves spray painting messages in English explicitly specifying a political ulterior motive. These responses reflect similar attempts under the Morsi administration of municipal workers painting over artwork and artists smugly giving thanks for a new canvas (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). Typified in this extended example is the contestation of forgetting and an effort to preserve a narrative. The host of artists that remain active and resolute in the area are a testament to how exclusive official avenues to memory-making are in Egypt. It becomes problematic when authoritative avenues for consolidation of collective memory, like education, are out of reach of the public influence. Graffiti is but one medium where the regime has sought to destroy particular details of January 25th. Despite these attempts at organized forgetting, January 25th remains on the minds of the

nation (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). Perhaps Egyptians are now so accustomed to private memory being more reliable than their own formal contexts for the creation of a sense of national past.

Attempting to Make Memory Dependents

Key to the people's memory of the January 25th revolution is its relationship to the present. The revolution has continued into and beyond the June 30th revolution. As influential writer Adhaf Souief articulates, it is an event that the citizenry is still living (Van de Bildt, 2015; Bromley, 2015). By examining the lives and actions of individual actors related to the movement, it becomes more fathomable how a narrative that disputes the states' version can survive. One has to be skilled in their chosen trades, intelligent, and amass the support of people behind their name. Indeed, in doing these things the individual has put directly put themselves in danger and likely those close to them. Given this fact, the tools of the revolutionaries evidently provide some kind of ammunition against a force that is overbearing and holds all material positions and powers. Likewise, the army and its figureheads also assault the people's memory of January 25th in more ways than one. Eric Hobsbawm's (1987) concept of invented traditions is certainly relevant as it refers to a "set of practices" that are looking to realize certain outcomes in people via rules and rituals (271). To establish continuity with a "suitable historic past", regular repetition of these specific practices must occur (271). In other words, memory needs maintenance and Egyptians are a captive audience. What the Egyptian army tend to do is use speeches in events and official state contexts. These and other vehicles for propaganda are critical. These were primarily executed via President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The army could rely on el-Sisi being the primary persona that they could use to wage a war on the discourse of the revolution. What these invented traditions would try to accomplish is the elimination of any alternative narrative of the revolution.

July 3, 2013 was an opportunity to plant the seeds for a new army regime. The Muslim Brotherhood-backed figure Morsi had lost the faith of the people and the army could regain a stronger hold on the country once more by installing General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. The June 30th revolution thus offered a guise for the military to make el-Sisi a friend of the people. El-Sisi

was defense minister to Morsi's president but was far enough away from his administration for a coup to manufacture artificial security about the military taking control of the government once more. By removing the apparent oppressors in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood there could be recognition of the military as defenders of the people once again (Van de Bildt, 2015). In one fell swoop, the products of democracy are slighted, and the familiar form of the military is revitalized. To get a view of the actual military-invented traditions, an examination of their timing is revealing. On the night Morsi resigned, el-Sisi had a televised speech where he first told the narrative that the army was necessary for reform and held responsibility for the people's destiny (Van de Bildt, 2015). El-Sisi even stated that the Egyptian people had called specifically for the army to help facilitate a transition. Furthermore, the interim president, Adly Mansour, explicitly stated that his mandate was given to him by Egyptians and that he was key to helping correct the course originally set by protestors on the 25th of January. Over time, this sentiment would be repeated in many speeches such as military parades, regularly televised speeches, and national holidays. Media outlets regularly included the ideas of the propaganda campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood fortifying their characterization as terrorists and enemies of the state at the same time (Van de Bildt, 2015). Grand projects like the opening of the new Suez Canal in 2015 served to add to a facade that the government was advancing an Egyptian renaissance. The military was repainting the picture of the revolution relatively successfully.

All of these practices in memory preservation are sustained to distract people. One of the difficulties not overcome by the revolution is how rooted the people are in the militarized state. There is no disentanglement of the army from civilians. The January 25th revolution itself was orchestrated on Police Day, a national holiday organized to recognize the police force's sacrifices (Abd el-Fattah, 2022; Van de Bildt, 2015). This was a purposeful action to strike directly against the government coercing people into respecting an institution that, over countless times in history, was a perpetrator of violence against the people. It was intended to be an action capable of saying more than any words could. Post-2011, these are now two directly conflicting events inviting commemorative action that

cannot coexist due to their broader social meaning. After the original revolt, there was a precedent set to honour the resistance. However, on the third anniversary of that day, el-Sisi was campaigning for the presidency and chose to honour the original holiday over the post-2011 event (Van de Bildt, 2015). By doing this, el-Sisi was enhancing the degradation of the memory of the 25th of January and simultaneously re-establishing the relic of blind respect for authority. However, his approach towards the revolution possesses several dimensions. He does not wholly ignore the memory of January 25, 2011, but he utilizes it as a means to make a more robust modern authoritarian government. In a few of his speeches, he praised the revolution for rediscovering the values that Egypt had long since lost (Yefet, 2020). Concomitantly, el-Sisi warns against any subsequent revolutions citing the instability on an economic level and the societal chaos it caused as detrimental things to the nation in the long term. By expressing these sentiments in events that are ritualized, and even the new constitution, there is control exerted on citizens (Van de Bildt, 2015). The invented traditions function as implicit threats. People can revolt, but it would benefit their future. People can remember the revolution, or they can look towards the new Egypt the military makes. El-Sisi can see the shortcomings of the revolution as well as the Mubarak government. By viewing that clearly from the January 25 revolution, he can see how commanding the position the military has politically and what a daunting task any revolution faces in achieving any type of dismantlement of the armed forces.

The Saviours of the Nation and the People

The discourse on the revolution is still very much active and not fully in control of the Sisi regime. Considered here is the contrasting value two groups place on January 25 and the two broad contrasting narratives they both possess. The public values and commemorates January 25 as a day of revolution that instigated change, reaffirmed the social power of the oppressed, and represented a decisive departure from subordination. The authoritarian government values January 25th as an instrument to consolidate power and shield itself from criticism. One group intrinsically values the 18 days, and the other views it as an extrinsic good. This inseparability of the military from

power creates a domineering relationship with its people and leaves the population unable to create change without the regime's accord. This supplies a rationale for why it is easy for the establishment to promote itself as the defender of the people and as those who will bring about the will of the revolution. Therein is the basis of the army's commemorative narrative. As per collective memory theorist Yael Zerubavel (1997), a commemorative narrative fashions a story about a "particular past," and this narrative draws upon "historical sources" doing it "selectively and creatively" (237). The attribute of selectivity is key to these revolutionary narratives. Both the people's narratives and the Sisi regime's are curated stories.

The commemorative narrative portraying the army as the defender of the people constructed around January 25th by the government is a master commemorative narrative. What the government's master commemorative narrative does is uses "omission, regression, repetition, and…conflation" on the events of January 25 (Zerubavel, 1997, 237). In the narrative, the army identifies its intimacy with civilians and uses this attribute to characterize the revolution as an internal struggle. By correspondingly identifying the army as politically important in realizing the will of the revolution, the army and the people are now the same entity. In other words, if the people want to enact their will they have to act through the army. By conflating the two groups with one another the revolution is no longer a valued memory of the people but of the military. In doing so, the values and goals of the people are entirely overwritten by the government's inherent concern for itself. An opportunity was taken to use an event portrayed as a turning point for Egypt as a nation to build a more enduring regime. That meant supposedly balancing citizens' rights and combating the false foe of the Muslim Brotherhood (Yefet, 2020; Van de Bildt, 2015). An effective way to protect the commemorative narrative is to make villains from the revolution and create fabricated victories for the revolution. That meant commemorating the revolution in such a way as to distance figures like Hosni Mubarak from the military and pose him as the primary villain of the revolution (Van de Bildt, 2015). By essentially taking the reins of power on July 3, 2013, declaring allegiance to the revolution, and singing its praises el-Sisi and the Egyptian military have immunity and have absolved themselves of any ill intent. By sanctifying

their own role in finishing the revolution, particular stories are overlooked.

The stories of protestors, activists, and martyrs are what is at the heart of a leaderless rebellion. They add character to the struggle and are the ones who pushed the revolution to its first, and so far, only genuine victory of ousting Mubarak. Writer Adhaf Souief, in one of her works, describes an early day of the revolution when she was in Cairo protesting with her comrades completely unarmed against security forces, declaring intentions of a peaceful protest (Bromley, 2015). She continues by describing the brutality they were met with and the experience of the resistance. This includes a paragraph that had only one sentence confirming that government forces did kill people with no mercy. The Battle of the Camel on 2 February 2011 is another story that demonstrates the struggle genuine heroes of the revolution endured (Mittermaier, 2015; Abd el-Fattah, 2022). The battle left 11 people dead and more injured. With Mubarak's eventual departure from office, in the short term at least, their sacrifices were not in vain. These stories are not commemorated in any capacity by the government, they are kept alive by the very people who made them. Hearing them is the initial recognition of an alternative commemorative narrative. The narrative that the real heroes of the revolution were on the streets every hour of every day of those original 18 days, or died in the streets, is buried. This alternative commemorative narrative opposes the dominant master commemorative of the army and is active under its supremacy (Zerubavel, 1997, 240). This is exemplified as mentioned earlier by the street art in Cairo. The revolutionary memory can also be thought of as a "countermemory" which contradicts the sentiments of the master commemorative narrative and is antagonistic towards it (240). The war between these two stories also constitutes a war of memory over the revolution's rightful ownership.

When considering national memory in Egypt, the tools for consecrating certain memories in a certain way principally lie with those in the seat of power. Thus, the master commemorative narrative is not necessarily accepted as it is extraordinarily convincing but as it is seen as futile to reject it. Aligning with the ideas of Yael Zerubavel (1997), the army and el-Sisi's narrative regarding the revolution is the political establishment's

construction of the past thereby serving its interests and enabling its agenda of legitimizing a new regime (241). The master commemorative narrative has certainly been challenged by the people's countermemory and the army has looked to silence it. This situation came to fruition as of 2013 when the army hijacked the June 30 counterrevolution and enabled figures like Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to claim the moniker of hero (Van de Bildt, 2015). Preserving this narrative meant attacking figures of the revolution, and hopefully the countermemory, such as activist and writer Alaa Abd el-Fattah. His writing, including his tweets on the revolution and progressive ideas, have drawn the ire of the regime due to their critical tone regarding political elites. After Morsi's ousting in 2013 a British era law outlawing protest was activated (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). Abd el-Fattah and other protestors responded by organizing a protest outside the advisory council. Days later, his home would be stormed by police with him, and his wife being assaulted. His residence, for the majority of the time after November 2013, would be a prison. Abd el-Fattah is only one example of how viscously the Egyptian government looks to defend its position. The desperation to keep up their incredulous facade is also epitomized by the police's killing of an Italian academic who was researching contemporary labour issues in Egypt (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). What results is an artificial narrative. One where no one can say that the revolution failed. One where the revolution is not the public's anymore. Where a memory feels like a fictional story.

The Remaining Nightmare

What should be clear is that Egypt's current predicament has been formed from the revolution and by the remembering of it. Almost counterintuitively, the misremembered remembering of it has been a contributor to what is arguably worse circumstances than the pre-2011 social, legal, and political ones Egypt faced. Now, the regime cannot meaningfully be challenged from below as in 2011 with any form of democracy unable to survive if installed (Del Panta, 2022). NGOs struggle to operate under the government with the establishment even disrupting the existing civic activity in Egyptian cities (Yefet, 2020). Contrary to what el-Sisi says, the political aims of the government are not on the same path as the social needs or aspirations of the public. This is contrary to

the army's continual expression of the post-revolutionary narrative that the establishment acts by and for the people. For instance, el-Sisi's current development of a new capital is apparently to ease overpopulation, build new infrastructure, and create affordable housing (Vox, 2022). Many critics of el-Sisi have said in reality it is a project to help move government buildings like the presidential palace to prevent another revolution. This includes spending exorbitant amounts of money on infrastructure that helps government forces more than it does the people who live in Cairo. Considering all of the immediate and long-term issues the people have to handle virtually on their own, national memory is guaranteed to remain vulnerable to alterations.

A citizen's experience of buying into the popular memory and the master commemorative narrative characterizes a virtuous, patriotic Egyptian. By following the government's wishes of a subordinate citizenry, the country is liable to run into more crises. What this does for Egypt's national identity is then worse than nothing. Amongst other things, it serves to impede progress on the objectives of social justice, freedom of expression, and eradication of corruption for decades at a time (Van de Bildt, 2015). The government is actually not performing its duty of being a steward of the people. Instead, whenever a crisis occurs, civilians take the brunt of its negative effects whether it be economic, social, or legal in nature. A newer collective memory concept can be derived from Egypt's current condition, which may be called a militarization of memory. The ideals of the armed forces being impressed on a national scale and on actors that are not necessarily associated with the military may characterize this concept. What is demanded of the collective is discipline, obedience, and service. A conflation of every actor in society being one and the same and their objectives being one and the same is another trait. Certainly, this concept is applicable to other nations with domineering military presences. It most certainly demonstrates how damage to collective memories can result in damage to national apparatuses like social service.

The current establishment in Egypt built a false identity from the memory of the January 25th revolution and has, so far, successfully safe kept its hold on political power and, in the process, has desecrated the

movement's memory. Egypt's story has not ended, and it is a worthy story to devote time to understanding. Though cataclysmic events such as revolutions can be thought of as unforgettable, they are still susceptible to warped interpretations under specific conditions. Like with many things in life, memory needs care and attention in order to survive in something resembling its current state.

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