



Transcript of oral history interview conducted with
on April 24, 2014 for the
University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st Century Revolution project

Interviewer:

This is an oral history interview for the American University in Cairo's University on the Square: Documenting Egypt's 21st-century Revolution project. The interviewee is #####, and the interview – ah, the interviewee is ##### and the interviewer is #####. The date is the 24th of April, and we are in Sharia Dori Street in Agouza. Please give your name and age and what you do for a living?

Interviewee:

My name is #####. I am 23, almost. And I'm doing a Master's degree in anthropology.

Interviewer:

What is your connection with AUC?

Interviewee:

I did my undergraduate studies at AUC, and then I worked on a project affiliated with the Institute for Gender and Women's Studies.

[00:01:00]

Interviewer:

Okay. When and how did you first learn about the demonstrations on the 25th of January?

Interviewee:

Word-of-mouth I would think. I think I saw it on the Internet too.

Interviewer:

And did you participate that day or—?

Interviewee:

On the 25th, no. I joked about it as a revolution.

Interviewer:

You joked about – so you didn't take it seriously.

Interviewee:

No, not on the first day.

Interviewer:

Okay. And had you been involved in the demonstrations of political or social organizing before then?

Interviewee:

No.

Interviewer:

No, okay. What was your opinion about the Egyptian government and Mubarak regime at that point?

Interviewee:

That it's a corrupt system and everyone knew that. It was a quote unquote democratically elected government and the emphasis was on the quotes.

[00:01:59]

Interviewer:

And can you tell about your involvement in the demonstrations of January and February 2011 including events you participated in or observed?

Interviewee:

On the 28th I went on my first demonstration with my family and my friends and since then up until Mubarak's resignation I think I made it a point to go on a demonstration every day, um, and I haven't spent the night outside of my house in any of these given dates, but I have marched almost every day to Tahrir on those 18 days.

Interviewer:

And how had the demonstration structured or organized then by whom?

[00:02:49]

Interviewee:

I wouldn't really know because I was more of a participant than I was a contributor. So I would know from my friends or from the Internet where people met and I just marched with everyone. I would see different political – well different organizations that had different parts of the march so and people would chant different chants depending on who they're aligning with, but at the end of the day I wasn't truly involved in any of the planning, so I'm not really sure how the planning worked out.

Interviewer:

Okay. And did you have the feeling that people were politicized in the sense of like through political groups or, like you know, like did you have the feeling that they were like?

Interviewee:

No, I think the majority of the people were not politicized in the formal sense of the term. Everyone is politicized because everything is political. Deciding what to wear in the morning could be political. So in that sense, yes, definitely everyone was politicized. And everyone knew what they were up against, but in the formal sense of the term what they're calling for or how they're organized or what their demands were or who they aligned with, then no most people went

because they were fed up with something in particular not because they had a vision of how to move forward.

[00:04:10]

Interviewer:

Can you give a description of the demonstrators you encountered and say something about how different groups interacted? You can also mention if you met or saw anyone famous?

Interviewee:

I think in a lot of them, I mean, in my personal experience, I personally stuck with the people that I know. I know that a lot of people went outside of their comfort zone and interacted with people from different parts of Egypt, or from different backgrounds, but I was more of an introvert during the process. So I would either stick with the people I already came with, or people I already know and met coincidentally. Anybody famous, I don't know I can't really recall, I'm sure there was lots of actors on the scene. There was Basma and Ahmed Helmy came once and Mona Zaki, it was a very big deal.

[00:05:09]

Interviewer:

Can you describe the presence of AUC faculty, students, alumni and staff at the demonstrations and their roles? Are there any particular individuals you want to mention?

Interviewee:

I don't think any of the AUC faculty who came, represented AUC per se. I think people represented themselves. So yes, there were people who were my teachers at AUC and there were my friends but I related to them on a personal level, not on an institutional level. I saw ##### there, my anthropology professor, and #####, my sociology professor, and a lot of the alumni whom I already knew as people.

[00:05:58]

Interviewer:

Okay. And what about students?

Interviewee:

The students, I mean, like I mentioned earlier, I came with the people that I already knew and since I was an AUC student at that time, my friends were AUC students as well so these were the people that I was familiar – that I was familiar with, but in terms of the roles, I think they had just as a big role as anyone else there. Some of them showed up, they participated, they contributed, they marched, they chanted. I'm sure some of them even helped organize, but I think it is a very linear role like many of the other that were taken up during that time.

Interviewer:

Were there speeches, chants, performances, things you overheard people say like jokes, leaflets or banners or signs that were especially memorable?

[00:06:57]

Interviewee:

"People demand the fall of the regime" because it was a meeting point. You would go and you would say, ah, meet me at the people because you knew where the banner was and there was a big banner at "*Erhal*, leave." This was another special meeting point. So they were good to have flagpoles around the square because you can't really find where you are else like any other way.

Interviewer:

And did you like remember there was a moment where like people were chanting opposing chants?

Interviewee:

Yeah, I mean, all the chants, I think, everything I say would be cliché "*El shaab youreed iskat al nizam*," "*Eish, Horreya, Adala*." It's become such buzzwords since then that it's not really – special anymore.

Interviewer:

Yeah, and there was like an amazing variety in jokes?

Interviewee:

Yes.

Interviewer:

Can you describe the commercial and service activities that emerged at the demonstrations like food vendors, entertainment, cleaning, medical services and the situation for existing shops?

[00:08:02]

Interviewee:

I don't think the medical services were commercialized or I'm not sure. I'm sure that pharmacies around the square have earned a lot of money. Back then a lot of the – most of the doctors who were on the scene volunteered, but in terms of street vendors there is lots of corn cob vendors and nuts and fuul and koshary and they would make it a point to bring their commodities into the square because they knew that people were hungry, and there was water and juice and so in terms of food supplies, I say, yes, it was very abundant, but in terms of other services, I'm not too sure. The shops around the demonstrations, it depends I think, I mean, I used to march from Mohandiseen to Tahrir and the shops in Mohandiseen were open and on the contrary, especially like it's not I don't think they were negatively affected. I think the kiosks, for example, people stopped to buy water and chips and biscuits and so in a way the march has positively impact what was on the way, what was around Tahrir, I mean, many things were closed like McDonald's and KFC and—

[00:09:28]

Interviewer:

Okay. Did you personally witness any violence? Did you suffer any injuries or bodily harm or see it happen to others?

Interviewee:

I've personally not suffered any bodily harm. Yes, I've seen it happen to others. And yes, I've witnessed some sort of violence.

Interviewer:

What do you think were the most pivotal moments of the event of January and February 2011 and what surprised you most?

[00:09:57]

Interviewee:

I think that there was no one specific event that I would point my finger towards and say this is it. I think the significance of the event is that every march, every person, every small event piled up and made it into what we saw. So I can't really say one event. I think it's like a big collage of events.

Interviewer:

Can you comment on how your perceptions and emotions changed over the initial 18 days of the revolution and totally afterwards?

Interviewee:

I think a lot of us were blindsided by the fact that we thought that the hard work was done and that it's time to build, but soon after we realized that it's not the case, and what has to be done still needs to be done, and it's not something that will happen in a day or two or even my lifetime and there is something that I've come to be okay with that. It's a long process that we're just all gonna have to be a part of.

[00:11:01]

Interviewer:

Did you personally observe a diversity of opinion about the events of the revolution? If so, did it – did this apply to members of your family, social circles, neighbors etc?

Interviewee:

Repeat the question.

Interviewer:

Can you comment on how – no, sorry. Did you personally observe a diversity of opinion about the events of the revolution? If so, did this apply to members of your family, social circles, neighborhoods etc.?

Interviewee:

Yes, of course. I mean, it is impossible for everyone to have the same opinion. I think my biggest encounter was with the person I grew up with who was my best friend, who is my best friend. She was not in Egypt at that time, and I couldn't really talk to her because the Internet was down and when the Internet went back up and I thought we could talk about this and share about like I can tell her about what happened, and I realized that she was completely anti what was happening and up until today we still have a major difference in opinion, and it's not that she fluctuates between yes or no-no. She is actively no from the very first day that this shouldn't have happened. So I think that a lot of people were in a very similar situations with family members, for

example, or with people they've grown very close to and in some cases it really affected it, but in my case it was just difference of opinion we didn't really let it come in the way of our friendship.

[00:12:27]

Interviewer:

Can you compare the coverage of events you saw on different television channels, prints, sources or other media?

Interviewee:

Yeah. It's obvious that you can tell what state TV wants you to know and what quote unquote alternative media is telling you and then what quote unquote media funded by the Gulf is telling you and what the Internet is telling you. Of course the Internet is quite diverse, but with certain sites on the media is telling you and because it was a very controversial event, you can easily see who is aligned to who. So yeah, I mean, it is quite obvious I would say.

[00:13:07]

Interviewer:

Have you noticed changes in the Egyptian media since President Mubarak's departure?

Interviewee:

Yeah, in the very beginning I remember that before he left there was a show on TV about the animal kingdom during the revolution and it was insane that they were reporting on the animal kingdom when people were literally in the street and soon after when Mubarak actually resigned, the state media started streaming what was happening on the street.

Interviewer:

Did you use Internet, social media sites like Facebook or Twitter?

Interviewee:

Um, yeah, but not as much as I – not as much as – definitely not as much as other people and definitely not during the 18 days because over a week we had no Internet, so not really.

[00:14:03]

Interviewer:

Can you describe what the Internet and mobile phone outage was like?

Interviewee:

It was hell. I would wake up in the morning and hope I'd find Internet, but I wouldn't, and it was really annoying because we've come to live with Internet like we live with food. So when you feel like a part of you is just not there and there's nothing you can do about it that's going to make you really angry.

Interviewer:

And how did you communicate with your like friends and who were maybe in Tahrir or like—?

Interviewee:

I mean, the mobile outage was just for a day so mostly over mobile, but the problem with the outage was that the network was down because of the number of people. So we would try to coordinate before we would go. We try to meet my house or someone's house and walk together and know that we are not supposed to be lost from one another etc.

Interviewer:

What were some of the rumors you heard? What do you think their sources were and what – and which had the most impact?

[00:15:03]

Interviewee:

Do we ever know where rumors come from? That's why they're called rumors. It's impossible to trace down a rumor. The point of rumor is that someone says something and then it gets turned into something else into something else, and the more it passes, the more it changes and this is just how rumors work. So I think this is a very, like, you can't ask that kind of question.

Interviewer:

During the 18 days of the revolution and immediately after, what were the conditions like in the neighborhood where you lived or areas you visited? Can you mention the public safety situation and security measures taken by you or others?

Interviewee:

I live in a relatively safe neighborhood because it's very residential. We don't have any stores and we don't really have any outsiders, quote unquote. So we didn't really have that much public, what were they called? Popular committees, like the rest of neighborhoods. We had once or twice and my brother went down once. He also went down once in Mohandiseen where my grandmother lives because she lives in a very commercial street and shops were broken into, but in general my – because I live in Agouza, and it's such a secluded neighborhood in a way we didn't really have a lot of trouble with that.

[00:16:13]

Interviewer:

Did your brothers spend the night on the streets?

Interviewee:

Yeah, my brother did once.

Interviewer:

How did the curfew affect you?

Interviewee:

I followed it for a while and then everyone started violating it. I started violating it as well. So I was just following the flow.

Interviewer:

Did you have any negative experiences in violating it?

Interviewee:

No.

Interviewer:

How did you leave Cairo, Egypt – no, sorry. Did you leave Cairo or Egypt at some point? Did you know many people who did?

Interviewee:

I left to do my Master's degree, but it had nothing to do with the revolution. And I know of one family who left after Muslim Brotherhood got into power.

[00:17:03]

Interviewer:

Were these mainly foreigners or Christians, or like was there any –?

Interviewee:

Yes, it was a Christian family.

Interviewer:

Did you know people who returned to Egypt specifically for the demonstrations or know someone who was active in demonstrating in other countries?

Interviewee:

Yeah, I think I know of some Egyptians who moved back because of what has happened and other Egyptians who were here and decided not to leave, or foreigners who decided to come and stay and yeah, a bunch.

Interviewer:

Okay. So how has the revolution affected AUC, and what kind of changes do you anticipate in the future?

Interviewee:

I don't think it has affected AUC in any way other than the fact that some of these classes were canceled because of demonstrations but I don't think — AUC moved to the New Cairo, had AUC been in Tahrir, we would've had a long discussion about how it was affected, but in the middle of the desert – no effect.

[00:18:06]

Interviewer:

How did the university administration react to the events of January and February 2011 and the times of crisis since then?

Interviewee:

I don't know, they gave us days off. I don't think the university has anything to do with the revolution and I think if it tries to then it tries to appropriate an event that it's not connected to and –

Interviewer:

So how has the revolution affected students at AUC? Have you noticed changes in their opinion or engagement with politics and social issues? Can you make a comparison with students from the Egyptian – from other Egyptian universities?

[00:18:47]

Interviewee:

Again, I don't think AUC represents the students that, AUC, like the student, like I don't think AUC represents the students because any because political parties are not allowed into AUC and political organization in general is not allowed into AUC. I was part of the Senate at some point and they wanted to change this clause and like AUC student body constitution that to allow political action at AUC because it's not allowed. That's prohibited. So I can't really talk about a university that prohibits political action in the context of revolution, doesn't make sense.

Interviewer:

But has – but there has been recent like demonstrations in AUC like or there have been demonstrations taking place. How did the university react to these demonstrations? Was there any like kind of reaction or?

Interviewee:

There was the- what's it called? The workers' strike and cleaners strike and a lot of the students were very passionate about it and they negotiated with the administration and they reached some concessions, but it's not really change quote unquote. It's more of let's negotiate and see what we can do about wage labor and it just it was part of a big movement in Egypt in general about people starting to ask for the rights and—

[00:20:04]

Interviewer:

How have teaching and classroom discussions changed?

Interviewee:

Well then a big event happened so you kind of mention it when you talk about politics. You could tell that people are pro or against it, and sometimes people would argue and a lot of classes were designed for the revolution. There was this history class, "*Iskat Al Nizam*" class that was specially designed for that, and a social movement class, for example, who do this for an example and so on and so forth.

Interviewer:

Have you been involved in demonstrations or other events after the departure of President Mubarak in February 2011?

Interviewee:

Yeah, yeah. Ever since then we marched a lot on Fridays. We marched against the Army and we marched against the Muslim brotherhood and now we march against the Army again so.

[00:21:00]

Interviewer:

Can you describe the ones that have the most vivid memories for you?

Interviewee:

No. They are all the same. They all seemed the same in a way. And it's all a blur. I can't really tell the days that this has happened on that day. It's more of—

Interviewer:

But do you think that the demonstrations against the Muslim brotherhood were different than the demonstrations against the military?

Interviewee:

I mean, again I was in my own bubble with my own circle of friends and we were against it all, so I can't really say that I noticed outside what was really going on.

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about the goals of demonstrations you took part in and how they differed from the protest of the 18 days? For example, how they were organized in the participants, methods, location etc.?

[00:21:55]

Interviewee:

The goals were different in the sense that they were more concrete. In the first 18 days the goal was for Mubarak to step down. This was the ultimate goal. After that the ultimate goal wasn't so ultimate anymore. It was much more dispersed to have much more concrete demands in a way so there is minimum wage and there is social security and there is, I mean, the term social justice has been dissected into very specific demands.

Interviewer:

Do you think that like the Muslim Brotherhood or the military reacted to these demands like did they make these part of their agendas in some way?

Interviewee:

No, no, not in any way. They're both quite right-wing neoliberal governments who apply very illiberal policies in terms of how they defined social justice and it is very different than what the people who demand the social justice were asking. So it's more about the discourse that was adopted in a way.

[00:22:59]

Interviewer:

And why do you think there was no alternative created like why do you think that the, for example, the left or the labor movement in some way did not manage to—

Interviewee:

Because it takes time to organize and because it's very hard to get very different people under one umbrella of the left and [pause] because—

Interviewer:

Can you imagine like one group that came out of your revolution as a party or as a like a new—?

Interviewee:

Yeah there was lots. I don't really think any of them had a specific agenda. That's the thing. Even if they do, it's more complicated because I think the biggest problem is that people think that people, individuals can change things and targeting individuals and targeting the state can change anything, but the problem is that the heads of institutions change, but the institutions don't change, and I think for us to see any kind of difference we need to start from the bureaucracy itself and not from removing X and putting Y.

[00:24:15]

And if left thinks that we can change anything by criticizing individuals or by proposing programs to the parliament, then I think they are wrong. I think it's much more entrenched into the system. I think corruption is entrenched into the system so cleansing the system is a very long process that will take years and years. So you can't really talk about an alternative today. You are talking about years and years and years of corruption and years and years of building like very, very, very corrupt system that benefits very, very little people.

[00:25:03]

As long as state employees go from 10 to 1 and don't care about their jobs because they don't get paid enough then we are not going anywhere. It's so what we need to offer is how to, we can start with minimum wage; we can start with cleansing institutions. It's all about the institutions. It has nothing to do with individuals and it has nothing to do with policies because what are policies? They're laws on paper.

Interviewer:

How did the government and police response, sorry, how did the government and police response to protest different from during the 18 days?

Interviewee:

The police are a repressive body. It would always be a repressive body no matter what happens it's a repressive body even if it claims it's not, it is. So it doesn't matter. When it doesn't matter or it can try to conceal that, but that doesn't mean that it's not a repressive body.

[00:26:07]

Interviewer:

How did the role of women in the protests change since the 18 days?

Interviewer:

Not sure that it has, there women here and there were women there. I don't think women are categorized. I don't think women are supposed to be categorized in one big box.

Interviewee:

But there was specific women marches, right, like there were like a few?

Interviewer:

Yeah, a few, but differ like women they are for women's day or anti-sexual harassment or we have been to two maybe, but yes, they were more women than men in these marches, but in general, there was a female presence and I don't really like using that term because it's not about being male or female. It is in a way about accessibility to the street and combating harassment. But if we start looking at women as women then we just start victimizing and I don't like that attitude.

[00:27:04]

Interviewer:

What was your reaction to the actions of SCAF and the military in general in the last two years?

Interviewee:

Okay, again, SCAF and the military are repressive institutions. They are hierarchical in their nature. They are repressive in their nature. We can't really expect them to change. We can't really expect to work with them. And by definition, the Army is a male-dominated right-wing conservative institution and there's nothing you can do about that and you can't really talk about its changes because its changes are all in mere appearances and how they choose to identify themselves, but that doesn't mean they change their essence. So if you talk about the police, if you talk about the Army, repressive institutions all over the world. It's not about how corruption, it's not about Mubarak. It's about this is just how it is. Anyway the police is the enemy anywhere.

[00:28:01]

Interviewer:

And what do you say to this whole argument which is going on right now, which few many people say like they have a national interest rather than—

Interviewee:

I think nationalism is a way to cover up real issues. It's like saying let's think of the bigger goal. Let's not think of what people actually need. This is a way to it's like when the U.S. has national security, you know this is a buzzword for using violence against non-U.S. nationals.

Interviewer:

Can you tell me if you were an active supporter of any of the candidates for President or Parliament or play the part in the Constitution referendum and if you voted?

[00:28:44]

Interviewee:

Okay. No, I wasn't really supportive of anyone. Yes, I voted. Yes, I regret voting. Yes, I'm against voting, and I'm not going to vote again because I'm against this kind of government in general. I'm against campaigning because campaigning means who has the most money wins and it has nothing to do with real goals or real agendas, and again I repeat, it's not about individuals. It's about changing institutions. So it doesn't matter who comes. It doesn't matter if it's X, Y or Z. What matters is looking at how things are actually run on a day-to-day basis. So no, I don't support anyone. I'm not going to support anyone, and I'm never going to vote again.

Interviewer:

Okay. What is your opinion on the Parliamentary and Presidential campaigning, and the results and of the Constitutional referendum?

Interviewee:

I don't care.

Interviewer:

Do you think the revolution that started on January 25th, 2011 is still continuing and did it change any of your views? What do you think is the major results that, oh, sorry, what do you think is major results have been and what do you think it means for Egypt's future?

[00:29:58]

Interviewee:

Yes, it still continues. We can't really yield results yet, and it means that the future is uncertain and that's better than knowing what the future is.

Interviewer:

During the time that Morsi was President, what were economic and security conditions like in Cairo, in Egypt, in your personal experience and that of people you know? Did you find there were more restrictions?

Interviewee:

The same. It doesn't matter. It's all the same. Food prices go up. People can't afford to buy basic foodstuffs. Subsidies goes up and down and up and down. It's like when Mubarak was in power, it's like the military is in power now. It does not matter.

Interviewer:

Can you describe your experience or observations of the state's response to protest activities in summer 2013 and then the extent of the free expression of opinions?

[00:30:58]

Interviewee:

Yeah, the state is always repressive, now they're showing it more. They have always been against freedom of expression. They do random arrests and they shut down newspapers and shutdown channels and so yes, of course they're anti-freedom of expression, they're the state.

Interviewer:

Do you think though that there is like, since the revolution there is a group of young people that are more politically active than before the revolution like you feel that there is?

Interviewee:

Yeah, yeah, that goes without saying. People have been much – people who have indeed, been against the system, but had no agency and had no space for agency, now they have the space and it brought a lot of good that was in people.

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about how you followed or participated in the development of the new Constitution? And what is your opinion on it?

[00:32:03]

Interviewee:

I wasn't here when the Constitution was being written. I moved to London a few months ago, and even if I was again I don't think that the Constitution matters I think, again it's laws on paper so I don't really care. I think people think that the Constitution is going to give us basic rights, but it doesn't so it doesn't really matter and the thing we have referendum is that it's always a yes. I think in the history of modern political – what's it called, whatever, there is only one referendum that passed it's a law in Chile, but in general, referendum is passed because people are generally more stability than they are instability so it's is a very, statistically, it really doesn't matter because everyone knows that constitutions pass no matter what the content is, people don't really read what's in the Constitution. People think its stability or instability, they essentialise anything.

[00:33:00]

Interviewer:

What are your expectations for Egypt's future due to these recent political developments as well as your own life? Did you change any of your views?

Interviewee:

I don't think I have changed my views. I think I have known them better. Now I think I grew with the revolution in a way. I think I've become more aware. I think I'm still very much against what I've always been against. What Egypt's future? It's bleak, but it's a long, long, long process and I think this was bound to happen and I think that generally if I want to talk selfishly, I think we are an unlucky generation that we came into this time that is dead, that is basically just like reaping the crops of what has been poisoned over the years. So we are just seeing poison and more poison and more poison and this leads to frustration, but what's important is not to be frustrated because if you're frustrated then frustrations won't carry on for years and years and years so it's good to always have a positive look at things to all see the silver linings because little by little this is how things change. It takes a very long time for things to actually really change.

Interviewer:

Thanks a lot for the interview.

Interviewee:

You're welcome.

[00:34:21]

[End of interview]