

We are not all Egyptian

Martin Jones

For many refugees in Egypt the weeks of the revolution were marked by isolation, fear and brutality. In the aftermath of the revolution, the promise of greater freedom has not yet been extended to refugees.

In the heady days of the Arab Spring in 2011, even as protesters in Tahrir Square took up a chant proclaiming “We are all Egyptian”, many refugees and migrants in Egypt were facing increased xenophobia, overt racism and violence. The Egyptian Foundation for Refugee Rights (EFRR) recorded its busiest year in 2011 as the number of refugees complaining of arbitrary arrest and detention, acts of violence and acts of discrimination increased by over 20%.

Until recently refugees in Egypt found a reception policy that has been characterised as ‘benign neglect’. The chief complaints by refugees before the revolution were the lack of access to public schooling, discrimination in employment and housing, arbitrary arrest, and criminal victimisation (by both Egyptians and other refugees). In addition, resettlement has effectively stopped being available for most refugees (except Iraqi refugees and particularly vulnerable refugees). Such changes in resettlement and status determination policies resulted in a mass protest and sit-in lasting 90 days outside UNHCR’s Cairo office at the end of 2005 – one of the most significant acts of public protest in Egypt in the decade before the revolution, a protest crushed by the Egyptian security forces with the loss of at least 26 lives.

In the uncertainty of the revolution, refugees were the object of suspicion. The propaganda of the failing Mubarak regime – that the country was under siege from foreign agitators – in conjunction with the notion that refugees were in Egypt thanks to the policies of the Mubarak regime triggered widespread hostility, refusal of services, profiteering, threats and violence against refugees. In one case, a 49-year-old single mother Iraqi refugee was accused by a neighbour of hoarding weapons and being a foreign instigator. Her home was raided by the Egyptian military and she was forced to find housing elsewhere.

The change in the nature of policing also had a profound effect on refugees. During the revolution, policing devolved to self-appointed local ‘popular committees’, which often erected barricades and armed themselves with knives and other basic weapons. Some committees did not allow refugees to join and even refugees who were long-standing residents of mixed neighbourhoods were questioned and harassed when moving about. However, some refugees report that they were welcomed to join committees and a significant number report feeling that being a member of a committee was the only contribution that they were allowed to make to the revolution.

Even in the aftermath of the revolution, the use of the military to perform civilian policing has posed new challenges for refugees. At a basic level, soldiers are not familiar with refugee identity documents and the legal category of ‘refugee’. This has resulted in several refugees being arrested and threatened with immediate

deportation. Fortunately, in these cases the lawyers of EFRR managed to intervene and have the refugees released (though not before they had been taken to the airport).

Since the revolution EFRR’s lawyers have had to visit clients in their homes because travel in Cairo has become much more difficult for refugees – and was impossible for periods of time during the revolution. UNHCR closed its offices in Egypt for almost two weeks during the revolution. During this time refugees were unable to access not only registration and status determination but also protection services and financial assistance. The office closure was mitigated by UNHCR’s use of local NGOs to disburse financial assistance. However, many refugees complained about the lack of transparency of payments and suspected corruption even within well-established local NGOs. To UNHCR’s credit, it learned from the revolution and shorter closures that occurred later caused much less disruption.

As well as UNHCR, local NGOs also closed their offices. The largest providers of services to refugees were all located near the epicentre of the revolution, and this posed problems both for staff getting to work and also refugees attending at their offices. Those that rely heavily upon international staff and international interns suffered attrition as staff members left Egypt.

Moving forward

The revolution brought a flood of attention to civil society in Egypt, leading to increased funding opportunities. The flood of money has brought with it public attention to the financing of civil society activities in Egypt. In particular, a very public expansion of funding of Egyptian civil society by the US government has led to much hostility in the Egyptian media. While civil society organisations have for at least the last decade worked under fairly severe restrictions, the revolution prompted a crack down on NGOs which has had a chilling effect on all civil society organisations, including refugee service providers, notwithstanding that none of them could function without funding from outside of Egypt.

Somewhat surprisingly in this environment, there has been a growth in interest by refugees in organising themselves into community-based organisations (CBOs). While there have been refugee CBOs in Cairo for a long time (particularly amongst well-established communities such as various Sudanese ethnicities), since the revolution a growing number of groups of refugees have approached EFRR with a view to formalising themselves as CBOs. Some of this interest may arise out of the isolation of the revolution and a desire to mitigate such a situation in the future. Alternatively, some of this interest may be emerging out of the new sense of opportunity and freedom felt by many in Egypt.

A growth in civil society has increased the mobility of experienced managers and made recruitment of experienced staff more difficult. All refugee service providers are now competing for staff with mainstream civil society organisations with higher political profiles and often offering higher salaries.

Establishing the rule of law

The revolution has posed challenges for the rule of law, among its casualties being the national human rights institutions of Egypt with which, in recent years, refugee NGOs had been able to engage to the benefit of refugees.

The biggest dangers to refugees in Egypt remain the ignorance and indifference in all political parties to refugees. Faced with long-standing pressing demands from citizens, refugee issues have been further marginalised. Since the revolution, most political actors have focused on citizens as being the principal rights bearers in Egypt; most of the rights in the Constitutional Declaration 2011 are extended only to citizens. Thus, despite the opportunity presented by the new political freedom brought by the revolution, advocates for refugees have been forced to largely focus on maintaining basic rights (such as *non-refoulement*) rather than extending refugee rights.

Conclusion

The chaos and uncertainty of the revolution and the discrimination it has released have resulted in an increase in human rights violations against refugees and made all refugees more vulnerable. As a sign of the fear felt by refugees, a growing number of them are, at the time of writing, staging a public protest (begun in March 2012) outside the Cairo offices of UNHCR. They demand either resettlement or secure segregated housing. (Ironically for one of the pilot sites of UNHCR's new urban refugee policy, the revolution has made refugees advocate for a policy of urban encampment.)

The new government's policies and practices towards refugees, along with the views of the Egyptian public, will be one of the first indicators of the extent to which the freedom and inclusion promised by the revolutionaries of Tahrir Square have been genuinely realised.

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