

## To Mohammad El-Sayed Said

**Al Jazeera's senior political analyst pays tribute to the community organisers who made Egypt's revolution possible.**

Marwan Bishara, Al Jazeera, 12 Feb 2011



**'If the Egyptian street does not move, there will not be any change,' one activist told Al Jazeera [AFP]**

In much of the world's media, the story of the popular revolution that transformed Egypt goes like this: an oppressed people who had suffered bitterly in silence suddenly decided that enough was enough and spontaneously rose up to claim their freedom.

Like most revolutions, however, this one was a long time coming. The historic takeover of Tahrir Square was the culmination of countless sit-ins, strikes, pickets and demonstrations over the last decade, by Egyptians who have risked and suffered repeated beatings, torture and imprisonment.

If we are going to do justice to the immense courage of these people who brought down Mubarak, we need to not only recognise their years of determination, but also to listen to what they are saying about how to bring true democracy to the Middle East - and to back their efforts in any way we can. With their blood - and, in some cases, with their lives - they have earned at least that much.

Watching television coverage of the brave people in Tahrir Square over the last two weeks changing their world and our's, I have seen some familiar faces. Several years ago, while on a book tour, I visited Cairo community centres and non-governmental organisations.

One such centre was run by George Ishaq, a charismatic community organiser who has since become a leader of Egypt's democracy movement.

The centre's large auditorium was filled with a mix of students, trade unionists, Christian nuns and Islamic scholars, as well as human-rights activists and intellectuals. Men and women of all ages: the same kind of mix, in fact, that we have been seeing in Liberation

Square.

### **Optimism and audacity**

Later that evening, I witnessed first-hand this industrious community leader playing host to - and engaging - neighbourhood organisers, opposition leaders and human-rights activists. It took optimism, audacity and a special brand of Egyptian humour.

[One of the many jokes that night was that Hosni Mubarak's son Alaa was about to buy apartments in two Cairo neighbourhoods, Zamalek and Ma'adi. "So what's wrong with that?" asked his father. Well, Alaa wanted the apartments to connect ...]

Over the last few days, I have watched and spoken to other community organisers taking center-stage in Tahrir Square, speaking on behalf of wide coalitions of demonstrators - Kefaya, the April 6 movement, the Coalition for Change and many others.

They are tireless coalition builders who have worked with labour unions and opposition parties old and new, including the Muslim Brotherhood, to bring about political change in Egypt.

One of those coalition builders was the late Mohammad El-Sayed Said. A brilliant thinker and a dedicated community organiser, Said laid down the theoretical foundations for today's activism in the Arab world, insisting on human rights, the rule of law and the independence of religious institutions as pillars of democracy in the region.

Said helped to found the Cairo Institute of Human Rights Studies and the Egyptian Organisation for Human Rights. His investigative reports systematically presented damning proof of the regime's violations.

As the English-language newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly* pointed out in its obituary: "He wrote a much-acclaimed report about the punishment of dissidents by torture, for which he was punished by being arrested and tortured."

### **Toll on health**

Years of such ill-treatment at the hands of Mubarak's regime took a heavy toll on Said's health. He died last year after a two-year struggle with cancer, and has been much missed in Tahrir Square.

As he showed me during several visits to Egypt over the past two decades, a network was slowly forming of bold community organisers who were bypassing the stale, established opposition parties to mobilise the young and the disaffected against Mubarak's regime.

Thanks to their hard work, the network spread throughout Cairo and other Egyptian cities.

Part of the media story about Egypt's revolution is that it was made possible by social networks on the web - as if Egyptians had just discovered Facebook.

But Mohammad El-Sayed Said understood long before many others that technology is good for democracy. His 1997 book *Progress Initiative* called for Egypt's transformation with the

help of modern technologies, and web communities have long been a part of the opposition networks he helped form.

Ishaq, for his part, knew that Tahrir Square had to be the goal. "If the Egyptian street does not move, there will not be any change," he told Al Jazeera late last year, soon after the government had rigged the parliamentary elections.

### **Contrasting visions**

The contrast between the visions of Said and Ishaq on the one hand, and that of the deposed Mubarak presidency on the other hand, couldn't be starker.

Like Mohammad El-Sayed Said, the new national leaders emerging from Tahrir Square seek a state that is neither religious nor neoliberal, capitalist nor socialist, Muslim nor Christian; they are dying, and many have literally, for a united, humane, prosperous, truly democratic Egypt for all.

The professional pundits who were parachuted into Egypt by the international media have brought with them pre-cooked conclusions about "radical Islam", security threats and what it takes to ensure regional stability.

But ordinary Egyptians have shown them - and us - that we don't have to sign up for a world of extremes, where Osama Bin Laden and Hosni Mubarak are the only possible choices.

The crowds in Tahrir Square stood firmly in the middle and stood their ground, are finally making room for everyone in Egypt - and giving the world a lesson about democracy in the process.