

Why the Language of Revolution Matters

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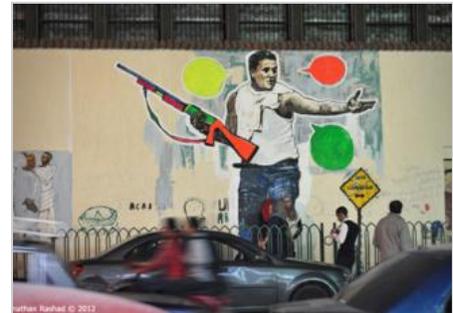
 by [Paul Sedra](#)

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[This article is part of a *Jadaliyya* roundtable on “The Language of Revolution in Egypt.” The roundtable, which can be accessed in full by clicking [here](#), features contributions by Paul Sedra, Robert Springborg, and Joshua Stacher.]

On 29 June, Mohamed Morsi presented himself to Tahrir Square as Egypt’s new president. The **moment** was hardly lacking for drama: “You are all my family, my friends,” he told the thousands assembled in the square and the millions watching on television. “We are here today to tell the whole world: these are the Egyptians, these are the revolutionaries, who made this epic, this revolution.” Morsi pointed to the crowd and identified the people as the source of his legitimacy: “There is no person, party, institution or authority over or above the will of the people.” Indeed, so great was the confidence of the new president that he **opened** his jacket, pointed to his chest and declared that he had forsaken a bullet-proof vest “as I trust God and I trust you, and I fear only God. And I will always be fully accountable to you.”



[Mural for prisoned fighter ‘Sambo’, on Mohamed Mahmoud street. Sambo is serving a military prison sentence after confiscating a shot-gun from police forces during clashes between them and families of martyrs of the revolution on 28 June 2011. Photo by Jonathan Rashad]

The next day, the *New York Times* published an **op-ed** by Professor Joshua Stacher of Kent State University under the title “How the Army Won Egypt’s Election.” In the piece, Stacher explains how the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) had, in fact, used the presidential elections to strengthen their rule of Egypt. What had effectively emerged from the supposed process of “democratic transition” that had begun back in February 2011 with the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak was a coup rather than a revolution. Indeed, despite the trappings of democracy, with no fewer than five ballots held between March 2011 and June 2012, the state apparatus as it had existed under Mubarak was still intact. SCAF had skillfully maneuvered itself into a position of lasting dominance over Egypt’s political landscape by negotiating with particular political actors—the Muslim Brotherhood foremost among them—and marginalizing the revolutionaries of the street protests.

Of course, Stacher is not alone in this assessment of Egypt’s post-Mubarak politics as a boon to the military and a bust for revolution. As early as 2 February 2011, well before Mubarak’s ouster, Professor Robert Springborg of the Naval Postgraduate School had **argued** in *Foreign Policy* (in an eerily prescient fashion): “The military will now enter into negotiations with opposition elements that it chooses.” Arguably, Professor Zeinab Abul-Magd of the American University in Cairo and Oberlin College has led the way in **detailing**, notably through a series of articles for *Al-Masry al-Youm* and *Egypt Independent*, the massive interests that the military has at stake, as well as the mechanisms SCAF has developed to protect them. So great are the doubts now about what actually has transpired in Egypt that most serious analysts of the country’s politics eschew the language of revolution in favor of uprisings, revolts, or simply protests.

Here I must confess that I have always insisted upon the language of revolution—despite the fact that I wholeheartedly agree with the arguments of Stacher and Abul-Magd. I insist on the language of revolution in large part because Egyptians still use this language of revolution themselves. And frankly, I think it is vital that they continue to use this language—not from an analytical standpoint, but from a political one. I fear that to abandon the language of revolution would be tantamount to abandoning the hopes, the ideals, and the expectations that accompanied the ouster of Mubarak.

We ignore at our peril the enormously productive character of language. After recounting how the machinations of SCAF and the deals of the Muslim Brotherhood have foreclosed certain paths ahead, we would be wise to recall what the language of revolution has in fact *enabled*, has *made possible*, in post-Mubarak Egypt. I marvel, for my own part, at the inspiration that Coptic Christian activists have taken from the revolution—an **inspiration** that has propelled them to challenge not only the Egyptian state, but their own Church leadership in unprecedented ways. Indeed, the language of revolution has created new expectations about what is just and unjust, what is acceptable and unacceptable in public life. And while politicians may fail to live up to these expectations, the expectations themselves remain vitally important nonetheless. To the extent that the language of revolution can enable a new political imagination in Egypt, we should embrace it.

I might stand accused here of indulging in, even promoting, a delusion. Why speak of a revolution where none has occurred? Why embrace a language that is at odds with the situation on the ground? Lest I be indicted for distributing rose-colored spectacles, I should emphasize that a wide-eyed appraisal of the balance of power is indispensable—and for this, we are indebted to Stacher and Abul-Magd.

Perhaps the best example of what I am driving at can be drawn from history. In a matter of days, the sixtieth anniversary of the 1952 Revolution will be upon us. All the arguments disputing Egypt's current "transition" as revolutionary would hold—perhaps doubly so—for the 1952 Revolution. Indeed, at the time, the 1952 Revolution was as traditional a coup as coups get, and arguably only became a revolution after the fact, or in retrospect.

Nevertheless, as Joel Gordon has illustrated through his prodigious **scholarship** on Nasser's Egypt and, above all, its **popular culture**, the language of revolution enabled a political imagination in 1950s and 1960s Egypt that paved the way for an unprecedented expansion in social mobility. This was a social mobility that Egyptians came to expect and demand, due in no small measure to the culture of social revolution developed and nurtured by writers, artists, musicians, playwrights, and filmmakers. So compelling was this culture of social revolution that Egyptians look back upon that time as a "golden age" in the country's cultural life, and artifacts of that time are taken up and reinscribed into the current revolutionary moment.

I expect, as the anniversary approaches, that there will be no shortage of repudiations of the 1952 Revolution, and properly so. But in this regard, the 1952 Revolution may offer us a lesson—not about democratic transitions or civil-military relations, but about broadening the political imagination.

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