INSIDE A REVOLUTION: TAHRIR SQUARE, 2011

REUTERS/PETER ANDREWS

One of the most remarkable things about the protests that ousted President Hosni Mubarak in February was the lack of violence. That was no accident

BY MARWA AWAD AND HUGO DIXON
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In early 2005, Cairo-based computer engineer Saad Bahaar was trawling the internet when he came across a trio of Egyptian expatriates who advocated the use of non-violent techniques to overthrow strongman Hosni Mubarak. Bahaar, then 32 and interested in politics and how Egypt might change, was intrigued by the idea. He contacted the group, lighting one of the fuses that would end in freedom in Tahrir Square six years later.

The three men he approached -- Hisham Morsy, a physician, Wael Adel, a civil engineer by training, and Adel's cousin Ahmed, a chemist -- had all left Egypt for jobs in London.

Inspired by the way Serbian group Otpor had brought down Slobodan Milosevic through non-violent protests in 2000, the trio studied previous struggles. One of their favourite thinkers was Gene Sharp, a Boston-based academic who was heavily influenced by Mahatma Gandhi. The group had set up a webpage in 2004 to propagate civil

disobedience ideas in Arabic.

At first, the three young Egyptians' activities were purely theoretical. But in November 2005, Wael Adel came to Cairo to give a three-day training session on civil disobedience. In the audience were about 30 members of Kefaya, an anti-Mubarak protest group whose name means "enough" in Arabic. Kefaya had gained prominence during the September 2005 presidential elections which Mubarak won by a landslide. During these protests, they had been attacked by thugs and some women members had been stripped naked. Bahaar joined Adel on the course and his career as an underground trainer in non-violent activism was born.

Adel taught activists how to function within a decentralised network. Doing so would make it harder for the security services to snuff them out by arresting leaders. They were also instructed on how to maintain a disciplined non-violent approach in the face of police brutality, and how to win over bystanders.

"The third party, the bystander sitting on the fence, will join when he realises that security forces' use of violence is unwarranted," Bahaar said in one of a series of interviews with Reuters. "Security will harass you to provoke an angry violent response to justify a repressive crackdown in the name of law and order. But you must avoid this trap."

ENOUGH: The movement in Egypt was inspired by Serbia's OTPOR, which means Resistance. **Left**, an elderly woman in Serbia carries an OTPOR banner, April 13, 2000 . **Below**, a boy sits inside the tracks of an army tank in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Feb. 18, 2011
REUTERS/GORAN TOMASEVIC, SUHAIB SALEM

The process took time. As Wael Adel put it during an interview in a rundown Cairo cafe in March, there was a process of "trial and error" before Egypt's non-violent warriors were strong enough to begin to take on a dictator.

Kefaya, for example, did run some more campaigns – including one for judicial independence in 2006. But it failed to stir mass protests or expand beyond the middle class elite. There was also internal disagreement between its younger activists and older politicians. By 2007, it had lost its momentum and many had quit.

THE ACADEMY OF CHANGE

IN THE MEANTIME, the trio of thinkers had morphed into an organisation called the Academy of Change -- based in London and ultimately moving to Qatar. The Academy became a window for Egypt's activists into civil disobedience movements outside the Arab world. To disseminate the new methods of resistance, it wrote books about nonviolent activism with a focus on the Arab world: "Civil Disobedience," "Nonviolent War the 3rd Choice" and "AOC MindQuake" that were published in 2007.

A year later the Academy published "Shields to Protect Against Fear", a manual on techniques to protect one's body against attacks by security services during a protest. "The idea of non-violent protest is not

MIND QUAKE? Technology proved crucial in the Egypt protests. The Academy of Change posted training manuals online, while social media -- here anti-government protesters sit near graffiti celebrating Facebook, Feb. 7, 2011 -- allowed people to more easily organise. **REUTERS/DYLAN MARTINEZ**

martyrdom," Adel said. "We knew to get ordinary Egyptians, and Arabs, to face their governments and security, they have to have tools to protect themselves. This boosts the morale and enthusiasm to go to the street."

The ideas espoused by the Academy spread through Egypt. The calls for change reached industrial areas where large groups of workers have long suffered low wages and bad work conditions. Mounting economic hardship mobilised workers in the Nile Delta city of Mahalla El Kobra, home to the country's biggest textile factory. The workers had been in contact with Kefaya activists and other independent labour activists. The groundwork for a sustained mass mobilisation was being prepared.

The first real victory sprung from Mahalla in December 2006 when over 20,000 textile workers staged a six-day strike over unpaid bonuses. The protesters -- peaceful but stubborn -- confused police forces accustomed to clashing with disorganised crowds. The government offered concessions to avoid losses from a halt to production.

Then came a setback. In April 2008, workers in Mahalla went out on strike again, over rising prices. An online call by Kefaya's former activists to support the Mahalla strike on fizzled out. Meanwhile, in Mahalla, the protest turned violent. Activists claim plain-clothes police destroyed public and police property and then blamed it on the protesters. Bloody clashes between police and Mahalla citizens lasted three days. Police fired live rounds and teargas, while enraged crowds threw rocks. At least three people were killed, hundreds were wounded and scores arrested.

More discipline was needed. Bahaar began to widen his efforts, traveling to disparate locations farther away from the capital to extend grassroots awareness of peaceful civil disobedience.

Meanwhile, ex-Kefaya activists formed the April 6 Facebook group, using the internet to gather supporters. The group adopted the Otpor clenched-fist logo and some members traveled to Serbia for civil disobedience training.

THE FACEBOOK ACTIVISTS

FEBRUARY 2010. Mohamed ElBaradei was back in Cairo. The former head of the International Atomic Energy Association and Nobel peace prize winner had inspired some of Egypt's younger generation that change was possible. Several of them had created a Facebook page backing ElBaradei as the country's next president. But how were they to achieve their goal given Mubarak's repressive regime? They turned to the Academy for help.

The Academy directed them to its online training manuals, which the Facebook activists tried for a while. But despite their internet savvy, many felt that relying entirely on online training was too theoretical. Couldn't the Academy give them practical training?

Enter Bahaar.

Those who had signed up to the Facebook page were divided into groups of 100. Bahaar trained eight of the groups in different parts of the country using, among other tools, Powerpoint presentations that explained how you maximise the power of a protest movement. Every protester had a family, and around the family was a wider community, Bahaar explained. If a protester was arrested or beaten by the police, his or her family might be radicalised. Similarly, if a policeman engaged in brutality, his family and social network might not be supportive. By maintaining disciplined non-violent activity, the regime's power could be progressively weakened.

Why wasn't Bahaar himself arrested? He says this was partly because he was working underground but also, he thinks, because the security services didn't judge his non-violent approach a threat.

Others were not so lucky. Khaled Said, 28, was beaten to death by police in Alexandria, Egypt's second-largest city, in June 2010. His family said he had posted a video showing police officers sharing the spoils of a drugs bust. Said's body was barely recognisable and the act of brutality galvanised further protests -- in particular, the anti-torture Facebook page "We are Khaled Said," created by Google executive Wael Ghonim and underground activist AbdelRahman Mansour.

The page played a pivotal role in spreading non-violent strategies such as "flash mob" silent protests, where groups of people suddenly gather in a public place and do something unusual in unison for a short time before dispersing. Instructions for a nationwide "flash mob" were posted on the page. Participants were told to dress in black

VICTORY: Pro-democracy supporters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, February 18, 2011. A nationwide "Victory March" celebrated the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak a week earlier. **REUTERS/MOHAMED ABD EL-GHANY**

and arrive at specific locations in small groups to skirt the ban on large public gatherings. They formed single files along main roads with their backs turned to the street. After a certain hour they marched away.

"The Khaled Said page drew countless willing supporters, many apolitical, because its focus was ending human rights violations and that is an issue that affects all citizens. The page set gradual, easy-to-handle tasks. People felt safe and joined," said Ahmed Saleh, one of the organisers working with the ElBaradei youth campaign and Khaled Said page.

Like Mahalla's 2006 strike, the flash mob was a new type of protest unfamiliar to security forces. Its cadres were organised, civil, and well diffused across Egypt -- and seemingly leaderless. The police didn't know how to react. Participants were trained in non-violent techniques -- both online, by the "Khaled Said" page founders, and on the ground, by Bahaar.

FREEDOM SQUARE

IN LATE 2010, THE Khaled Said page decided to call for something more ambitious -- a nationwide march to demand the dissolution of parliament, the disbanding of the state security agency, seen by Egyptians as the state's main arm of torture, and the resignation of the interior minister.

The date chosen for mass action was Jan. 25, Egypt's national police day. Mansour -- who was conscripted into the army on Jan. 17 -- posted the call for the nationwide march on Dec. 28. Protesters were urged to march to Cairo's Tahrir Square and other public spaces across the country. The page was not yet calling for Mubarak to go. It was Tunisia's popular uprising, which reached its climax on Jan. 14 with the ousting of President Zein El Abedine Ben Ali, which turned Egypt's protests into an uprising.

The protest drew people of all ages and backgrounds. By 8 p.m. a unified, single chant inspired by Tunisia rang around Tahrir (Arabic for "freedom") Square: "The people demand the fall of the regime." By then, many understood at least a few of the tactics of non-violent disobedience. "You don't need to train every single protester, only a small group of activists well connected with people in their local areas. Ideas spread like a virus," says Bahaar.

Protesters conversed with riot police sent to cordon off the Square. The aim was simple: win over those in uniform. Women gave out food and biscuits to hungry conscripts and officers.

Young people quickly regrouped after being dispersed. Some climbed security personnel carriers to drag down officers firing teargas and water cannons, raising the crowd's resolve to push security back and gain more ground. A pattern of whistling and rhythmic banging of stones on metal fences in Tahrir spontaneously developed when they needed to rally reinforcements to hold the fort. Protesters would also whistle to signal their success in forcing security to pull back.

Encouraged by the mass protests, the Khaled Said page posted a second online call for Friday, Jan. 28, naming the event a "revolution" to overthrow the regime.

April 6 activists and youth from the Muslim Brotherhood formed the crucial front lines of protesters who broke security cordons and later faced attacks from pro-Mubarak loyalists.

NOT OVER: A protester shouts anti-Mubarak slogans during a protest in Tahrir square, April 8, 2011. Protesters packed Cairo's central square to put pressure on the ruling military council to prosecute Hosni Mubarak. **REUTERS/ ASMAA WAGUIH**

The youth of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt's most organised opposition force whose members are accustomed to working within disciplined ranks, played a critical role in organising activists into security teams to guard Tahrir Square's multiple entrances. They searched those who came into the square for weapons or fluids that could be turned into Molotov cocktails. They wanted neither infiltrators nor supporters to turn to violence.

To help demonstrators hold true to non-violent resistance, the Academy posted online an eight-minute film covering similar ground to its 2008 manual. This explained how people could protect their chests and backs with makeshift shields made of plastic and thick cardboard, and how to mitigate the effect of teargas by covering their faces with handkerchiefs doused in vinegar, lemons or onions.

For the most part, people were having fun. They also took pride in their ownership of the square. Music was put on. Volunteers and protesters swept it, collected garbage and built outhouses.

"Non-violent action is not just about non-violence, but also about joy and happiness," Adel said. "The festive atmosphere was a key element to drawing the high numbers that Egypt had rarely seen. People felt safe so they came out. They saw in Tahrir what Egypt could possibly be in the future and they wanted to be part of this new Egypt."

The protests were not entirely peaceful. In particular, scuffles broke out after a group of thugs thought to have been organised by Mubarak's henchmen charged through the square on horses and camels on Feb. 2, beating and whipping protestors in what came to be known as the "Battle of the Camel". Many demonstrators fought back, throwing stones at Mubarak loyalists to keep them from entering the square. But there was no wholesale riot and discipline returned.

"The key to a successful non-violent revolt is its ability to constantly reinvent and correct itself," Adel says. "If violence or conflict breaks out, quickly resolve it while finding ways to avoid it." Trained cadres shouted "peaceful, peaceful!" to restrain their hotter-headed colleagues. Soon after, the army, which had not been involved in the clashes, said it would not fire on unarmed civilians.

Nine days later Mubarak was gone.

(Editing by Simon Robinson and Sara Ledwith)

"POLITICAL JUJITSU"

BY HUGO DIXON
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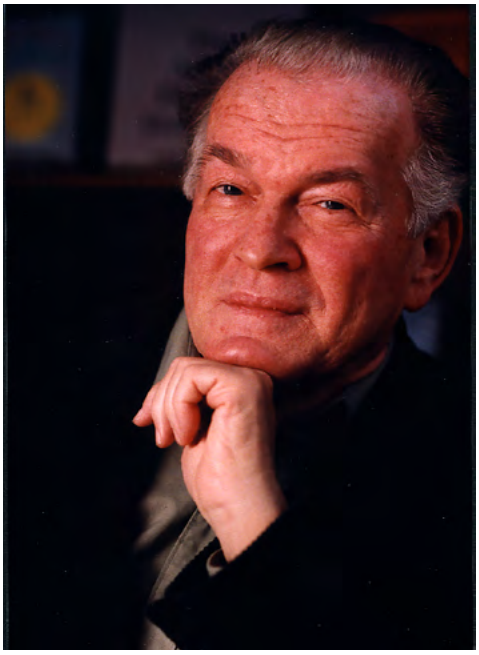
Gene Sharp's writings on how to use non-violent techniques to bring down autocratic regimes are often cited as a major influence on the activists who led the campaign against Egypt's Hosni Mubarak.

The 83-year-old American academic had never met or spoken to those behind the successful uprising. But he has strong views on what happened in Egypt and what is happening elsewhere in the Middle East. First and foremost, he stresses the importance of preparation and discipline. The Egyptian protesters were prepared while the Libyans were not, Sharp said in an hour-long telephone interview from Boston, where he runs the Albert Einstein Institution, a non-profit organisation that advances the study and use of nonviolent action in conflicts around the world.

Discipline means remaining non-violent despite brutality and provocation. "Sometimes the people using non-violent techniques don't fully understand the methods," says Sharp, who has written numerous books on the history of non-violent struggles, including two books on India's Mahatma Gandhi. "They think that if they refrain from violence, their opponents will too."

Quite the opposite, Sharp argues. The more authoritarian a regime, the more you have to expect it to resort to violence. That's partly because it's in its DNA; but also because it deliberately uses violence to provoke a response, knowing that this will solidify its own power base.

On the other hand, if protesters can maintain a disciplined non-violent approach, the regime's brutality will boomerang on itself. Sharp calls this "political jujitsu".



SHARP THINKER: U.S. academic Sharp's writings have been a major influence on protest movements around the world. **REUTERS/HANDOUT**

Massacres undermine the support of all but the most hardened members of an autocrat's entourage. Soldiers and policemen find it hard to mow down peaceful civilians. The turning point in the Egyptian revolution was when the army said it would not fire on the crowd in Tahrir Square.

Sharp says political jujitsu can be used in situations that look particularly unpromising -- for example, Norway during World War Two. When the puppet regime of Vidkun Quisling sent teachers who refused to promote Nazi theories to concentration camps, further protests erupted. Eventually, the teachers were released.

The key mistake in a non-violent struggle is resorting to violence oneself. This is not a matter of morality but of efficacy. A classic case, he argues, were the protests against Russia's Tsar Nicholas II in 1905. After hundreds of people were killed or injured in a peaceful march on the Winter Palace, the army was on the point of mutiny as soldiers did not have the stomach for further bloodshed. But it closed ranks after the Bolsheviks resorted to violence, according to Sharp -- and the Romanovs lasted another 12 years.

Sharp believes the same mistake was made in Libya. Early on in the revolution, some parts of Gadaffi's army joined the rebels' cause, especially in the second city of Benghazi. It was good that the reliability of the army had been undermined, he says, but bad when some soldiers turned their guns the other way. That allowed the crumbling regime to close ranks. Ideally, the disaffected soldiers would have sat in their barracks and gone on strike.

But wouldn't Libya's protestors have been massacred if they hadn't resorted to violence? This happened, for example, in Yemen, where 52 anti-government protesters were killed in the capital on March 18 by plain-clothes snipers; and in Syria, where at least 37 demonstrators were killed on Mar. 23 in the southern town of Deraa.

Sharp's answer is "probably yes". But he argues that the need to take casualties is no different in non-violent struggles than in violent ones; and when one suffers casualties, in both cases, it is necessary to maintain discipline. To run a successful non-violent struggle, one has to overcome fear.

But what happens if you haven't been trained like the Egyptian revolutionaries and can't therefore maintain discipline in the face of brutal attacks? Sharp says you shouldn't start a struggle you are not competent to see through. Better to start with smaller campaigns until you build up expertise and discipline, as happened in Egypt, before you try to overthrow a whole regime.

That said, Sharp acknowledges that it can be hard for protesters in one part of the Arab world to stand idly by when the whole region is in ferment. And he says it is sometimes possible to win without discipline and training: he points to non-violent uprisings in El Salvador and Guatemala in 1944. But such an approach is risky.

Sharp also says it is vital that protestors don't try to short-cut their road to freedom by relying on outside intervention. Part of the reason is that the international community has its own agenda. But it's also because it's "extremely important for the future that the victory is won by the people on the ground. They have to cherish that victory." If you rely on others to get you your freedom, you don't overcome fear. You are then more vulnerable to the next dictator. He thinks that won't be the case with Egypt's revolutionaries – whom he'd be very happy to meet.

(Editing by Simon Robinson and Sara Ledwith)

COVER PHOTO: Protestors sleep in make shift tents at Tahrir Square in Cairo March 2, 2011. REUTERS/PETER ANDREWS

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