

# Amro Ali

## Middle East Specialist and Satirist

‘The Arab Spring, Egypt and Australia: The Intertwinement of Perceptions and Influences’

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A common question that I was asked by the Egyptian youth when I was in Tahrir Square in Cairo was ‘what do Australian think of our revolution?’ I replied that they were very impressed, but if you want to push an Egyptian youth’s buttons you just have to say ‘you guys were inspired by Tunisia’. That is like Australia being inspired by New Zealand.

For a period I was travelling between Cairo and Alexandria quite often to study how protests were organised and behaved in the two cities. When I was in Alexandria in what was dubbed The Second Revolution, in late May, one of the lead protesters took out his Smart Phone and found out through his Al Jazeera app. what was going on in Cairo. He yelled to the crowd ‘our brothers in Cairo have reached one million’, the sub-text to that being ‘we can do better’.

To understand Cairo and Alexandria, it is rather like the Melbourne-Sydney rivalry except that one did end up being the capital city.

As trivial as this may seem, it is underscoring something that needs further discussion in the discourse of the Arab Spring. They are all perceptions and influences - and the values and narratives that shape and are shaped by them. I want to look at three aspects: Imagery as an agent of change; Egyptian soft power and how this impacts on the Arab Spring and finally where Australia fits into this emerging new Arab order.

Revolutions and civil disturbances have common underpinnings – rampant corruption, rising food prices, unaccountability, rich-poor divide, the list goes on. Yet the masses do not react to these factors alone, let alone unemployment figures. They respond heavily to the relationship between their private beliefs and public lies that are no longer sustainable. The perception of a fracture in the status quo enables the galvanisation of cascading effects. This in large, is the *modus operandi* of the Arab Spring.

In his book *Private Truths, Public Lies, the Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*, Timur Kuran explains the consequences of expressing support for an opinion that is not actually one’s belief, or making a choice against one’s actual desire. He calls it preference falsification – where the status quo owes its stability to preference falsification, there are people waiting for an opportunity, and perhaps others who can easily be induced, to stand up for change.

Some eye-opening event or an apparent shift in social pressures may cause public opposition to swell. The public preferences of individuals are interdependent, so a jump in public opposition may be self-augmenting. Under the right conditions, every jump will galvanize further jumps.

This reminds me of the 1940 classic novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Wonder*. One underlying message that comes from the reading is that people see what they want to see, and in the era of digital cameras and rapid transmission of images, they are given plenty to see and act upon.

What the Arab Spring and the Egyptian revolution in particular have illustrated is the power of images to ignite and reignite the momentum. With the advent of new technologies this has produced a visual overload with a story that has been saturated with images and symbolism to spearhead continuing values and narratives.

Jonathon Jones from the *Guardian* newspaper puts it like this:

“It is impossible to overstate the visual and spectacular nature of the revolution. From the first time a crowd surges into a public square to the last cannonade, revolutions live and die by the image. A revolution is a moment when politics becomes ecstatic, symbolic and existential. The usual slow routine of news and debate suddenly speeds up and the fastest form of communication is the visual image. The first phase of the Egyptian revolution began with the image of that great people’s gathering in Tahrir Square; the second has begun with the picture of a fallen tyrant.”

In the case of Egypt what we have seen here is a series of images that had a profound effect on the Egyptian psyche and altered their perceptions, behaviours and activities in the process.

The first iconic image was on the first day of the revolution, on the 25 or 26 of January, of a lone protester walking up towards the security forces. It became the equivalent of the Tiananmen Square tank man, a very common profile picture on Facebook, with the caption ‘Walk Like an Egyptian’.

The next picture is Christians guarding Muslims while they are praying. This was very symbolic given that a month earlier there was a church bombing in Alexandria and the fear of sectarian tensions flaring up. What Tahrir Square did was take away the divide-and-conquer strategy of the regime. The following weekend the Muslims protected the Christians while they were praying.

The third image was one of Mubarak’s fatal mistakes in sending the regime thugs into Tahrir Square on 2 February. The night before he had given a speech and people were polarised about whether they should wait for Mubarak to step down in September or whether he should leave now. This incident sealed his fate and resulted in more eruptions of protest around the country.

The fourth image is of a Google executive who started the “We are Khaled Saeed” Facebook page that was a pivotal factor behind the revolution and was in prison for 13 days. Upon his release, he was interviewed for about half an hour on private satellite TV, and was asked a question about what he thought about all the Egyptian youths who had died and he was shown pictures of the deceased, he started crying. Then he said the one line that changed a lot of views around the country when he said to the mothers of the martyrs “I’m not a hero, I slept for 12 days...The heroes, they’re the ones who were in the street, who took part in the demonstrations, sacrificed their lives, were beaten, arrested and exposed to danger...*I swear to God, it’s not our mistake. It’s the mistake of every one of those in power who doesn’t want to let go of it,*” and he cried his way out of the studio.

This event was partially responsible for leasing a new life on the revolution when it looked as though it might die out

The next image is of a woman kissing a soldier. This symbolises the unity of the people and the army against Mubarak’s wishes because he wanted the army to fire on the people. The next image, which I can’t date exactly but I assume it is towards the end of the revolution. I have seen it in so many publications and on posters. It is the joy and ecstasy of getting rid of a tyrant after 30 years.

The final picture is Mubarak on the first day of his trial in a cage in court. So what we see is a series of images that have set a precedent in the Arab world for what is possible. The scene of Mubarak in court is quite unprecedented for the Arab world.

The trial of Saddam Hussein was seen as a show trial and an act of sectarian vengeance, while Mubarak’s trial was seen as a result of people pressure. The image of a humiliated Mubarak has been a nightmare scenario for all the autocrats in the region which explains why the trial was not shown on state TV in Libya, Syria and Yemen.

Yet images alone can’t give direction, and thus the need for regime opponents to look at symbolism.

What reform movements always do is to look for a unifying poster child. Egypt got its Khaled Saeed; Tunisia got its Mohamed Bouazizi and Syria Hamza Ali-Khateeb. Hamza was a Syrian boy who was brutally mutilated in a most horrific and disturbing way. Mohamed set himself on fire and kick-started the Arab Spring as a result. To those who are not familiar with Saeed, he was a 28-year-old Alexandrian who died at the hands of the police in an internet café last year and became the unifying symbol of the Egyptian revolution.

Why him and not the countless others who suffered at the hands of the regime? Let’s look at the often repeated account: A young man enters an internet café to upload a video to

YouTube of crooked police sharing drug spoils. Here you have a powerful figure that now encapsulates the younger generation. He was young, social media savvy and anti-authoritarian.

On top of that his name is given to one of the largest activist Facebook groups *We Are All Khaled Saeed*. Much of this does not square with witness accounts and primary sources I looked into, but that does not matter – people will see what they want to see. The Egyptian pro-democracy movement found a unifying poster child and Khaled Saeed's myth was set in stone.

Looking for historical parallels, you can think of Rosa Parks. The story can be quite telling: A 42-year-old African American who refused to give up her seat to a white man in Montgomery, thus lighting the fire of the Civil Rights movement for the next decade. What is most overlooked is that the Civil Rights organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People, was proactively searching for a Rosa Parks.

They had rejected previous cases where the black victim might damage their cause such as being pregnant out of wedlock. The NAACP was going to construct the narrative for black emancipation. For Martin Luther King Jr and the NAACP perceptions of legitimacy for the black struggle had to be maintained at all costs. Rosa Parks, a middle-aged, church-going seamstress approached the NAACP and volunteered to be a test case and history took care of the rest.

Likewise, Khaled Saeed was moulded in order to symbolise the struggle for freedom. Such figures help to personalise and humanise complex issues that can often drift into murky abstractions. As long as the Arab Spring pushes onwards we will continue to see the rise of icons. What is giving these icons a larger than life image is social media.

Social media is aiding the rapid dissemination of symbols, images and information. One of the early examples of the Arab Spring's transnational activism were Tunisian bloggers telling Egyptian protesters to use vinegar or onions in their scarves to ward off the effects of tear gas.

The role of social media has been a divisive debate with many on the conservative end of the spectrum downplaying it to such an extent as to make it inconsequential. You know you are in for a long night when you get a sceptical statement that Facebook did as much for Egypt as the fax machine did for the fall of the Berlin Wall.

But to the contrary, the notion of the Youth Revolution has nurtured a discourse that sets the youth dramatically apart from older living generations. Social media is transformed into the defining hallmark. The application of Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and other tools has cultivated a self-perpetuating belief that such tools are instrumental to enacting positive change, and hence the more people who use such technologies, despite not having placed much importance on them before.

Moreover, online identities become increasingly important to the revolution. For example, it is not uncommon for youths to change their birth dates on Facebook to 25 January 2011 the day the revolution began.

I do not for a moment want to suggest that these technologies caused the revolution, but they did facilitate it, and it is difficult to study the revolution without giving prominence to social media. To get a sense of the perception of Egyptians on this issue, you have to listen to their jokes and one of the jokes that is making the rounds is this one:

Mubarak goes to the afterlife and meets former Presidents Nasser and Sadat, and Nasser says that he died of poison and Sadat says he died of bullets and they ask Mubarak how he died, and he says they (Egyptians) killed me by Facebook.

The role of Al Jazeera in the uprising cannot be emphasised enough and has been discussed elsewhere, yet Al Jazeera and Arab satellite television in general has played a subtle role in fashioning the Arabic language.

The Arabic language consists of the literary standard *Fusha* or the Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) which is taught in all schools, this is close to the classic literary standard. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century some Arab populations often faced the problem after school that unless their work required MSA – such as in diplomacy, banking or the clergy – they drifted away from it and resorted to the colloquial dialect.

This was fine if it was limited to the cities and towns, but transnationally, it was a different story. Fifty years ago if someone living in Lebanon wanted to speak to someone in Morocco, they would struggle to communicate with each other as neither would understand each other's dialect.

One way to get around this was to communicate in the Egyptian dialect due to the widespread Egyptian popular arts, so you had this tiny geographic space in the Nile Delta influencing a wide section of the Arab world. With the rise of satellite television and Al Jazeera the MSA was pushed forth and this re-engaged Arab viewers with the MSA.

This is not to say that Arabic viewers could not comprehend the standard Arabic before, but satellite TV invigorated the debates, quiz shows the panels, meaning that viewers were engaging with each other across national boundaries, while State TV receded into the background.

So the Arab youth are a generation that have been raised in the era of Al Jazeera and other stations that strengthen the post schooling use of the MSA language. To those of low socio-economic backgrounds, the saturation of Al Jazeera and other satellite television stations enabled a basic level of understanding of what was occurring in the world.

To understand this quasi-standardisation of the Arabic language is to understand the rapid transmission of perceptions and influences and the Arab world's current upheaval. The cross-pollination of discourse meant Arabs started to ask the hard questions of each other. Questions like 'why does Spain have a bigger GDP than the entire combined GDP of the Arab world?' 'How do China, India and Brazil move ahead while Egypt is left behind?' So bit-by-bit, day-by-day, common grievances were established across national boundaries.

The idea that Arabs have been swindled by higher politics started to gain traction more than ever before. Moreover, the success of overthrowing Mubarak has rekindled one of Egypt's strongest traditional assets.

One pivotal factor that is defining the Arab Spring is a resurgence of Egypt's 'soft power'. The term was first coined by Joseph Nye as an alternative to hard power which means military might and economic sanctions. Soft power emphasises the power of attraction as opposed to the power of coercion. It is an ability to influence and shape the preferences of others as a derivative of a nation's culture, values and achievements.

The concept of soft power has often been used by the US and recently China, but the world has gravity centres of soft power. Just like India has a soft power influence over the sub-continent and Brazil over Latin America, so does Egypt over the Arab World. This comes in the form of the Islamic discourse, making it the intellectual nucleus of Sunni Islam. Then there is Egypt's popular music and film industry in a widely comprehensible dialect that, for example, is adopted by Lebanese pop singers.

Egypt's mixture of soft power and hard power reached a peak in the 1950s and 60s. The rise of Nasserite Egypt, underpinned by pan-Arab ideology, inspired the overthrow of monarchies and colonialism across the Arab World. In Arab eyes the Egyptian prestige received a battering following the 1967 War, but more so following the signing of the Camp David Treaty in the late 1970s.

The overthrow of Mubarak has been seen as Egypt's resurgence to its prominent role as the leader of the Arab World. There is a logical outcome to this.

The Egyptian Revolution mesmerised the world, but to the Arab countries its influence has been profound. What I have noticed over the past few months in Tahrir Square is the number of non-Egyptians filling up the square to rally people to their cause. There were many Libyans, Palestinians, Yemenis and Syrians as well as throngs of Egyptian supporters utilising the square for their democratic struggles. Everything from the discussion of strategies, tactics and ideas to publicising and enacting their motives has been witnessed there.

This is not just symbolic of Tahrir Square's perception as a source of legitimacy, but a perception of Egypt as a leader of the Arab world. Political, social, cultural and religious

movements in Arab countries take their cues more often than not from developments in Egypt. This is why it is critical that Egypt gets its democratic experiment right.

One country that knows this problem too well is Saudi Arabia which is struggling to halt the cascading effects. The Saudis have extended an invitation to Morocco and Jordan to join the Gulf Cooperation Council. According to a School of Oriental and African Studies scholar, the aim is to construct the perception that revolutions are a phenomenon that only affects republics but never touches a monarchy.

Strategists in Riyadh are reviewing Jordan's powerful security apparatus as a useful buffer against revolutionary penetration from neighbouring Syria. Morocco is the one that has puzzled many observers due to its location at the other end of the Arab world. Yet its advantage is that it has a 35 million population and a large military which may take the place of Saudi Arabia's traditional ally – Egypt.

The discussion of perceptions and influences inevitably brings up where Australia fits into this. Let's take the street-level view. When testing their knowledge of Australia – and this is all anecdotal – Egyptian's youth's perceptions of Australia hovers around the stereotypes. I remember one saying the Opera House which I thought was an upgrade from kangaroos. But when they do say kangaroos, I point out that back in Australia they associate Egypt with camels, so I think our ignorance is mutually complementary.

English language schools that hire Australians often describe them as humble and unassuming, remembering the Aussie youth that go to Bali are not the same ones that go to Egypt.

Looking at a wider historical timeline of Egyptian perceptions of Australia is a mixed bag. You have the Aussie soldiers who trained in Cairo. They made themselves into the popular literature of Naguib Mahfouz, not in the most positive light unfortunately. Then you had Menzies who was given the unenviable task of handing an ultimatum to Nasser during the 1956 Suez Crisis. I remember in 1998 when Richard Butler was leading the weapons inspections in Iraq, the press and the street called him 'that Australian' in the not so nicest way.

Yet such instances, including the Iraq War, have not been sustained enough to translate into negative public opinion against Australia. When Australia really does well is during the Olympics, but public diplomacy is not an every four-year event.

The United States and the United Kingdom have born the full brunt of anti-Western attitudes in the region. Australia fortunately does not have much historical baggage in that part of the world. Thus Australia has the advantage of an easier platform to start off on. A discussion on perceptions and influences would logically conclude that Australia needs to follow up on public diplomacy initiatives.

For Australia's aspiring middle power status, it needs to match resources to the task ahead. Along with perceptions and influences, a country like Egypt affects Australia in

many tangible and intangible ways. If you look at energy prices, the 18 days of the Egyptian Revolution alone highlighted the precarious position of world markets and in particular the sudden spike in energy prices.

While Egypt is neither an oil exporter, nor a regional stock market heavyweight, it is one of the few hotspots, being home to the Suez Canal and Sumed pipeline that runs from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, where events can dramatically have an outsized impact on global energy prices. This illustrates the need for global stability, but this time Australia will no longer need to associate itself with autocracy, at least for Egypt, and supporting democracy is a guarantee to stability.

The other major factor is Australian education. The Middle East's growing contribution to Australia's second largest export after mining – international education – has seen educational links between the Middle East and Australia grow in strength in the past decade. Australian engagement with the Middle East offers Arab students a viable alternative to other study destinations. An emerging Egyptian middle class is going to pursue the route of international education, similar to the Gulf students, except to a more proportional level than before.

Due to the location of the Suez Canal that handles eight per cent of the global sea trade, Australian trade links with Europe are inevitably impacted. Instability may give rise to shocks that menace global supply chains, distribution channels and infrastructure that Australia needs for its international operations.

Finally, destabilisation leads to radicalisation. Egypt's role as the heart of intellectual Sunni Islam plays a pivotal role in spearheading the religious discourse in the wider Islamic world. Egypt's religious institutions have spawned much constructive debate, but aberrations have bred the intellectual foundations of radical Islamism. Accordingly Australia's neighbouring Islamic groups are equally inspired to feed off developments in the Middle East – Egypt in particular – to legitimise their agendas.

I remember once when I was in Jakarta I was invited to a mosque and when they heard I was of Egyptian heritage they started asking me all these questions about jurisprudence and Sharia Law, and other questions I could not answer, it was just by my association with this heritage that gave them this amplified image.

I am currently working on a project with the Lowy Institute on the way Australia can engage with the Middle East, through Egypt's youth groups, as a conduit for change, looking at initiatives such as university partnerships and cultural diplomacy. We cannot pretend that Australia can match US's resources, but what it can do is have a disproportional effect by focusing on the educational system and the leaders of tomorrow.

As the Arab Spring evolves into a contest of values, Australia will need to realign itself with the pluralistic, progressive and reformist values – a process driven by the youth. Egypt's youth are going to have a significant impact on the debate in the next few



decades and Australia needs to be supporting these values in the debate as announced by the youth.

Otto von Bismarck once said that political genius is to listen to the hoof beats of history, and those hoof beats are coming from the youth groups who harbour anti-authoritarian sentiments and are poised to play a leading role in a future Egypt.

Egypt's youth have capitalised on their country's soft power image and have transcended borders. They delivered medical convoys across Libya, pressured the Egyptian authorities to open the Rafah crossing to Gaza, travelled to Sudan to meet with the State Minister for Foreign Affairs, and played a major hand in fashioning the non-violent but short-lived third Palestinian Intifada.

The democratic transition will not be easy, but if a new pluralism and liberalism emerges from the new political spaces, carved by men and women of various backgrounds, this will send a message to the region about change.

I am updating all the developments concerning the Arab Spring on my website [amroali.com](http://amroali.com).

Thank you very much.

## QUESTIONS

**You alluded to the need for Australia to concentrate on Egyptian youth and the leaders of tomorrow. There is great euphoria at the moment but it may not live up to expectations. What will emerge in the next 20 years?**

Looking at this from a civil society point of view: the youth are fearless. This is what defines the post-Mubarak Egypt. I think the sub-text of what you are saying is concern about the ghost of 1979 Iran. This is what many observers fear. So will it be an autocracy in a different form such as a theocracy? The answer to that is no.

The reason is that economic factors drive political imperatives. Take the example of Iran. It is an oil economy. Oil economies do not need friends in the international community to sell oil. But Egypt's economy is service driven, especially by tourism. It needs to have good relations with the public overseas as well as the leaders. It cannot afford to do as Iran does.

The military has learnt the lesson from around the time of the revolution in 1979. Then the Iranian military did not get involved and left the groups to play off each other. In Egypt they got involved. You also have to look at cause and effect. If one per cent of the Egyptian population protest it paralyses the economy to an extent. There is a saying – who controls Tahrir Square controls Cairo; who controls Cairo controls Egypt. So the centre of gravity is Cairo and to a lesser extent Alexandria and they have weekly protests that are consistently calling for democratic reforms.

One thing I will say about the youth is that they are impatient and just being with them and studying them has given me much optimism. These will be the ones that will take over eventually – that is 70 per cent of the population who are under 30.

**You spoke of symbols and images. What of philosophy and politics – a plan to go forward? Is there a political vacuum forming?**

There is a problem which I have noticed in that there is no key figure that can lead Egypt through its transition. Egyptian TV and the discourse on the street are heavily saturated in the revolution. There are ads on television and people and organisations trying to jump on the bandwagon such as Vodafone who are even trying to take credit for the revolution.

The problem lies in how the revolution started – it was a decentralised and horizontal movement. Regimes are used to a hierarchical approach but because of social media it gave faceless protesters an advantage. People were networking and coming out at the same time in what are called flashpoint protests in a matter of hours. Yet bringing a regime down is easier than building something up that is newer and untested.

A Gallop Poll was done in 2008, in which 98 per cent of Egyptians said religion was important in their lives. There was nine per cent who said they wanted separation between religion and the state. There was 14 per cent who wanted a theocracy and 70 per cent wanted an advisory role for religious scholars.

Egypt is the second highest, after Lebanon, to accept another religion, despite the flare-ups we have seen this year, and most importantly, 97 per cent support the constitutional guarantees of freedom of speech - the highest in the Muslim world.

So the underlying message is that Egyptians are religious but because they pray five times a day does not mean they are part of the Muslim Brotherhood. The Islamists often try to play identity politics, and the problem with the secular liberals is that they attack core identities rather than the policies of the Islamists.

I know what Egyptians don't want. They don't want tyranny whether it is civil, military or religious, but the philosophy that is evolving emanates from the volatile defined Youth revolution. The youth have become very emboldened, but the euphoria they have generated has not yet been translated into meaningful platforms. There is nothing solid, but I would say that people are moving more towards liberalism and away from a religious autocracy.

They have seen what has happened in Iran and Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia in the past, and they are just not finding those models appealing.

### **Will the Egyptian military adopt a secular position in the same way as the Turkish military?**

In Turkey the military always got involved in Turkish politics, but it was thanks to the push for entry into the European Union that the Islamic Party was able to curtail the powers of the Turkish military.

The Muslim Brotherhood is looking towards Turkey as a model, rather than Iran, because it can see now that you can be a Muslim majority country, as well as democratic and economically successful. Bread and butter will be the language that is spoken.

As for the Egyptian military, they do have economic interests. To what extent they will let go is anyone's guess, but if you read the articles written directly after the revolution there was a lot of pessimisms. The revolution's goals still have a long way to go with matters like cancelling the emergency law and ceasing military trials. Ironically, Mubarak's is a civilian trial. Having said that the Egyptian masses love the military, because it is a conscripted country. So it is really anyone's guess and I think towards the end of the year we will know more clearly.

### **Can you give us insights into how relationships will develop with Egypt's neighbours – Israel and the Shiite states?**

Egypt does not want a war with Israel. It has moved on from that. Fifty-four per cent of Egyptians polled want the Camp David Treaty to be reviewed. The reason for this is that Egyptians have the perception that they have been taken for a ride, because the treaty allowed Israel to get rid of its strategic threat from the south and that enabled intensification of settlement activity in the Occupied Territories as well as wars in Lebanon.

Also Mubarak's close relationship with Israel was something that really frightened them – this included his complicity in the Gaza blockade as well as the gas prices that were sold under the market rates to Israel. The younger generation have matured. They can distinguish between Jews and Zionism – something you will generally not find among people over 40.

As regards to Iran, strategic concerns exist, but on the cultural and street level, they don't have a problem with Iran. For a start they don't share a border. Historically Egyptians are not anti-Shiite because there is no sizeable population of Shiites in Egypt that would be of concern. If you go back in history the Fatimids who ruled Egypt for 200 years were Shiites, and despite the pros and cons of that era, they generally did leave a positive legacy in terms of literature, art and architecture.

Also from the elite point of view, King Farouk, who was deposed in 1952, was married to an Iranian princess; the Shah of Iran is buried in Cairo.

We are going to see a reengaged Egypt that will be reasserting itself as the regional power, forming new alliances.

The Egyptian view is that Israel has had it quite easy for the past 30 years but this time it is going to have to play a more constructive role in the region, particularly in relation to the Palestinian issue.

**Have there been any moves towards a constitutional convention? Given the degree of corruption that existed before, how are the Egyptians going to get rid of it?**

Egypt had a constitutional referendum earlier this year and I do not know anyone who did not vote in that referendum. It was unprecedented, and the demands for free and transparent elections are louder than ever.

Corruption fighting has been taken up by civil and youth groups. Historically, corruption decreases dramatically in Egypt following major revolutions and coup d'états, such as the years following 1919 and 1952. I do not automatically tie the eventual decrease in corruption to the events this year, but corruption was one of major driving factors behind the youth revolts.

On a similar point, the transition to democracy is definitely not going to be easy, but the fact of the matter is that the Arab World depends on this image of a democratic and anti-corrupt Egypt for them to take the cues to follow through. This is just how the region works historically.

You have Nasser taking over power, then you see a series of coups and revolutions espousing Nasserism in the Arab world. But democracy, anti-corruption, and the rule of law is coming from the younger generation and whenever you have a youth bulge in history dramatic changes always follow. We had this in Australia and in the West generally with the post-war baby boomers. They did not overthrow governments but the counter-culture movement in the 1960s led to radical changes that redefined society.

Democratic change is not going to happen overnight but we are going to have to engage with the youth, not with the elites or those who are part of the old regime or anyone who might try and torpedo reforms.

The youth in general are very pro-democratic, even those who consider themselves to be Islamists. There is a momentum that they are acting upon and a desperation to change Egypt for the better.

I will give you an example from when I was in Tahrir Square. Usually Friday is a day when everything flares up after prayers. Around 2pm people gather there. There was this one girl who was on the microphone shouting pro-democracy slogans. She was on the microphone from 2pm all the way to 10pm. She was inter-changing with her colleagues, but if I tried to do that I would lose my voice after 20 minutes.

There was a passion and intensity that kept her going, and when I spoke to her she told me she had been arrested many times and she showed me the beatings she had received, but she didn't care. She just came back and did what she did.

I don't want to exaggerate and say that all Egyptian youth are doing this. People still have to earn a living, but it is enough to see the cause and effect. Just like when there was a high suspicion that Mubarak's trial was going to be delayed, there was a mass protest organised based on the mere suspicious perception that he might be let off easily. In the end he was brought to trial this month.