

افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مباد بدین بوم و بر زنده یک تن مباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com

afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages

زبان های اروپایی

Al Jazeera

Egypt's rooftop revolutionaries

Al Jazeera meets the vanguards of the pro-democracy protests that have flooded Cairo's Tahrir Square for 12 days

2/6/2011

CAIRO, EGYPT - Behind a barricaded front door across the street from the famed Egyptian Museum, through a tight, fluorescent-lit hallway crammed with a makeshift kitchen, bed and debris meant to obstruct intruders, up a winding, outdoor metal staircase with a view over a darkened back street, we find Mohammed, a smiling, skinny 23-year-old with a buzzed head and a scarf around his neck.



More than a million people have filled the area in and around Cairo's Tahrir Square [AFP]

Mohammed and the group of mostly young men he commands on this 10th floor rooftop exposed to the damp Cairo night are the vanguards of the pro-democracy protests that have flooded Tahrir Square for 12 days. They are the occupiers of this apartment building and its defenders against assault by supporters of Egypt's president, Hosni Mubarak.

They are a diverse crowd. Mohammed idolises Gamal Abdel Nasser, the socialist and nationalist hero of modern Egyptian politics, but elsewhere on the rooftop we find Sohail, the son of a wealthy businessman who professes no religious ideology but admires the Muslim Brotherhood's organisational skills.

Mohammed has admitted us to their rooftop ramparts not because he is particularly fond of our company, though we all get along well, but because he no longer trusts the Egyptian media to report fairly on the story of Tahrir Square and the hundreds of thousands of protesters there who are eager to change their country's ossified political and social system.

There on the roof, ducking behind a large satellite dish when the ever-present military helicopter circles nearby, Mohammed and Sohail offer us a nuanced look at who is protesting, what motivates them, and how a group of untrained 20-somethings came together to fend off a coordinated, determined attempt - likely backed by elements within the government - to crush them beneath a hail of rocks, Molotov cocktails and gunfire.

Against the thugs

The combat between anti-government protesters and Mubarak supporters around the museum on Wednesday night and Thursday morning was intense and bloody, involving thousands on either side. An Al Jazeera online producer at the barricades during the fighting witnessed two protesters being treated for critical gunshot wounds and several others who were hit by rocks or petrol bombs.

Citizen video obtained by Al Jazeera has also shown anti-government protesters apparently being hit by live gunfire after being targeted by a green laser.

After 12 hours of overnight combat, the protesters in the square managed to advance their wall of shields - metal barricades scavenged from a nearby construction site - around 200 metres from where the fighting began, and they eventually overwhelmed and defeated the outnumbered Mubarak supporters.

Mohammed and his group of around 15 men, like others that night, fought their way hand-to-hand into the apartment building they now occupy. They did so in the face of a determined opponent that was resupplied throughout the night by cars that arrived bearing more petrol bombs.

In the midst of battle, the protesters realised they needed someone to act as a leader. The nominees included those who had remained most calm during tough situations and those who displayed the best tactical sense.

"Battle naturally creates leaders," Mohammed said.

One man, curiously, nominated himself. Most of the others nominated Mohammed. After it was clear that Mohammed would win, the man grabbed a metal pipe and tried to attack, declaring that he was actually a member of the state security forces. The protesters quickly subdued him and dragged him off to a makeshift prison that had been established at a metro station in the centre of the square.

Like other groups, Mohammed's crew started wearing badges - handwritten pieces of tape - stating their role and unit. Realising these could be forged, they switched to a simple password system to grant entry to the building, one that changes every 12 hours.

The rooftop leaders in the area, including Mohammed, communicate with ground-level leaders and others by mobile phone, tracking the movements of any approaching baltageya, or "thugs".

Dozens of soldiers armed with automatic assault rifles and wearing flak jackets and ballistic helmets stand outside, keeping watch over the square and guarding the museum, but they take no action against the parallel civilian authority right next door.

The army did ask the man who owns the occupied building, as well as three others nearby, to boot the squatting protesters out, but the protesters refused, and the army has yet to act. The owner of the top-floor apartment, which Mohammed's group found unlocked and have been using, told the young men they were free to make themselves at home as long as they did not ruin the place.

On the rooftop, piles of rocks await any baltageya assault. Atop a nearby building we visited earlier, another squad of protesters has wrapped rocks in petrol-soaked rags that they will ignite and use to swing and hurl the projectiles a greater distance. A stockpile of the Molotov cocktails, as they are known, left behind by retreating Mubarak supporters lies nearby.

A marriage of authority and money

Mohammed and Sohail, his 20-year-old comrade, told us a refrain about the Mubarak supporters that we had heard repeated many times in the square: If they really cared, why aren't they still here? Why aren't they mounting continued protests in their own square?

Indeed, aside from the police identification cards found on some of the captured Mubarak supporters, the one thing that most indicated government collusion in the violent attacks on Tahrir Square was the co-ordination with which the Mubarak crowd came and went. Often on Wednesday and Thursday, lines of male spectators would appear on the overpass above the museum barricades at odd hours - including after dark - and watch the museum barricades ominously until eventually other men behind them would begin launching rocks.

Mohammed said he had seen people at the Sayyida Zeinab metro station, south of Tahrir Square, handing out 350 Egyptian pounds per person to encourage Mubarak supporters to mass near the square. These are the same "thugs," Sohail said, who the government unleashes on election days to overrun polling stations, guarantee access for the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP), and intimidate opposition voters.

It was the government's blatant robbing of the most recent parliamentary election, held in November and December, that pushed everyone over the edge, he said. The NDP essentially won more than 90 per cent of parliament, wiping out all but one seat for the Muslim Brotherhood, the banned but semi-tolerated movement that had previously held around a fifth of the People's Assembly.

"The president has managed to keep power through the marriage of money and authority," Mohammed told us.

Even before the call went out for mass protests to begin on January 25, "we could feel the effects of corruption that the country suffers from," Mohammed said. "From unemployment to corruption to rigged elections. I can feel it myself, I am unemployed, I have a business degree, but I cannot find an appropriate job. We can feel it in our daily lives, in everyday dealings, nobody can get anything done in any government institution without paying, without bribery."

Sohail - whose father owns a business where he can find a job and who studies at a private university for the comparatively high cost of around 10,000 pounds (\$1,700) per semester - told us his aim was to "bring down the president".

Both he and Mohammed said that a lack of dignity was the protesters' essential grievance, and one that had succeeded in attracting people from all walks of life.

"[The government] degrades us so badly, the police used to degrade the people so much, that's why when people took to the streets on January 28" - the violent Friday following the major street protests - "they just wanted revenge, nothing more," he said.

Mohammed said that the demands of the youth were not "classist," and that corruption and repression weigh on all layers of society.

"As I said, we are prepared to live on the bare minimum, as long as we feel like we have our dignity, that we are walking down the streets with our dignity," Mohammed said. "Not like when a policeman sees me in the street and decides to make life difficult for me, asking me about my ID, and even if I have my ID and am obeying the law, I don't have a weapon or hashish or drugs or anything, just for the sake of it he will stop me and make me pay to pass. And if you don't pay, he will make up a charge and throw you in prison, this is how things work here."

The West's fears

In the first days of the Egyptian street protests, the Mubarak government quickly blamed the unrest on the Muslim Brotherhood, even though the group had stated in the days before January 25 that it would not participate.

It was not a new tactic: The Egyptian leadership is fond of invoking Western fears of an "Islamist takeover", especially since September 11, to rally support for its repressive tactics, including the continued enforcement of emergency national security laws that have been in place since the 1981 assassination of Anwar al-Sadat, Mubarak's predecessor.

Though the government is now negotiating with the Brotherhood and other opposition groups to play out a transition as long as it can, it continues to smear the protesters in the hopes of limiting their popular support. On Friday, in a one-room shop near the northern barricades, an army officer chatting with the owner told Al Jazeera that some of the protesters were "terrorists" and that they had been infiltrated by agents from other countries, including Iran.

Mohammed said that he and his comrades were well aware of the information campaign being waged against them.

"People in their homes who are sympathetic with us will no longer be," he said. "They will think we are agents of foreign countries who are trying to affect the stability of our nation."

If the disagreements on the rooftop are any indication, the protest movement does contain a diverse ideological array.

While Sohail admires the Muslim Brotherhood's organisation and discipline, Mohammed blames the group for plotting to assassinate Nasser and says they try to hide their aspirations for political power.

The Brotherhood uses religious slogans to brainwash the youth, Mohammed told us. They are fine allies now, but he does not want to see them lead.

Some protesters give the Brotherhood credit for being the square's most stalwart defenders, the ones who rarely leave and show the most bravery on the front lines. At night, much of the debate around the campfires and many of the speeches over the loudspeakers concern religion.

But Sohail was not worried.

"If the president leaves, I don't care about my political party, everyone will unite," he told us.

Mohammed shared a similar view of the movement's solidarity.

"There are old men, there are people over 40, there are those younger than 20, there are women. The people who are here represent a state of monopolisation throughout the whole nation," he said.

"Everyone suffers, there isn't one person who doesn't suffer. Everyone down there is suffering, everyone at home is suffering, even the people who come to oppose us, those who support the president, they suffer as well, but they've been paid."

Down below, next to the museum, the army had formed a cordon to prevent most of the protesters from nearing the outermost layer of barricades, where the worst fighting took place. Only the sidewalk to the side was open for foot traffic.

It was clear the government was attempting to return a sense of normalcy to the city; businesses and banks were set to open on Sunday, and the army was intent on clearing away all signs of discord but for the crowd in the square. Men in fluorescent vests even went about clearing debris and trash from the streets where protesters had died just nights before.

But as high-ranking opposition figures negotiate a transition with Mubarak's right-hand man, former intelligence chief and newly appointed vice-president Omar Suleiman, Mohammed, Sohail and the men on the rooftops remain dug in, hoping for a complete overhaul.

After the thugs' attack on Wednesday, they will not accept negotiation with Mubarak.

"He's hiding a dagger behind his back," Mohammed said.