

Weaving Revolution: Speaking with Kamal el-Fayoumi

Austin Mackell

The mainstream media, when covering the story of the Arab Spring in general, and Egypt in particular, has looked mainly at the role played by the internet, and internet activists. In particular, they singled out social networking sites and the new media distributed through them, as the key factor in propelling Egyptians to rise up.

They are not wrong to highlight this, as without doubt such technologies, and their courageous application, did help ferment the massive protests that have rocked Cairo since the 25th of January last year. What's more, this form of online, horizontal organisation, on this massive scale, is something new and momentous, which should be inspiring for people the world over, and terrifying for the elites who rule us.

However, as of course they couldn't discuss any serious revolutionary theory (almost all of which is Marxist and therefore taboo), they have told only half of the story. The whole story of this revolution, like that of all revolutions, is one of class coalitions. In the decade leading up to 2011, the baton of rebellion was passed back and forth repeatedly between two distinct categories of political actors.

One category is that of the bourgeois groups, led by intellectuals and activists, focussed in Cairo and Alexandria, and focussing on political rights and broad systematic changes. Perhaps the most seminal of these is the Egyptian Movement for Change, better known by its slogan *Kifaya* (meaning "enough").

Kifaya's agitation, particularly around the time of the 2005 elections, were perhaps the first signs that despite the massive security apparatus of the Mubarak regime, Egyptians were still able to organise protests on issues including the extension of Mubarak's term, speculation of a transfer of power to his son Gamal, and the generally corrupt and stagnant state of the Egyptian nation.

As Kifaya faltered and fell by the way side, the second category - working class groups - organised around economic demands, often quite local, and strongest in the industrial cities of the Nile Delta and along the Suez Canal, began to rise. These in turn inspired more bourgeois activists, and an increasingly intense feedback loop was created.

Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than by the story of the April 6th Facebook group.

April 6th was one of the main groups – along with We Are All Khalid Said – who called for protests on January 25, which had been until then, known as police day. As a result, after Mubarak's fall, the group's leadership, in particular Ahmed Maher, became among the most sought after celebrities in Egypt, with

foreign and local press – not to mention world leaders including David Cameron, eagerly seeking interviews and meetings. Amazingly – despite the group's massive press exposure – almost no one bothered to talk about the origins of the group, or even where its name came from.

That would mean talking about the strike, on April 6th, 2008, of the textile workers of Mahalla, which the online network was founded to support. To do that would lead into a serious discussion of the Mahalla workers' struggle against the Mubarak regime and its IMF and World Bank sponsored neo-liberal programs of "reform". The importance of opposition to neoliberalism in propelling the massive uprising is still largely ignored by the mainstream media – despite the three day general strike which immediately preceded Mubarak's forced resignation, and which must have hastened the decision of the generals (who control nearly 40% of Egypt's economy through unsupervised private public partnerships, under the veil of secrecy which currently shrouds Egypt's military budget) and other Egyptian elites - to turn on the embattled president.

In part this imbalance is a result of ease of access afforded by the concentration of the bourgeois elements of the revolutionary coalition in the large cities, but more important were overlapping ideological and aesthetic factors. The young, photogenic, net-savvy, middle class, English speaking urban activists are attractive and relatively unchallenging agents of change. Their story fits with the narrative of an uprising motivated by individual liberal freedoms and highly compatible with the vision of corporate-led globalization as an agent for positive change. The workers, on the other hand, are a coarser lot. They generally speak only Arabic, and their narrative of revolution revolves around calls for a strong state sector, social solidarity, and collective rights – in particular the right for collective bargaining, which has been stripped from them by yellow, state controlled unions. Their fight, against privatization, economic injustice, and the corrupt and weak union leadership, is deemed too gritty, too 20th century.

It is beyond the scope and resources of this article to comprehensively address this imbalance, or to give a full account of this struggle (those seeking such an account should look to the scholarly work done on the issue, most notably by Stanford professor Joel Beinin). What shall be attempted is to transmit and contextualize the testimony of Kamal Mohammed el-Fayoumi, an independent union organizer from Mahalla who has worked in Masr Spinning and Weaving Company for over 28 years, and whose father worked there before him. The testimony was taken during an extensive interview carried out in April of 2011 by Egyptian filmmaker Montasser Bayoud and myself. Wherever possible Mr el-Fayoumi's own words have been included. In some cases their original sequence has been altered to maintain thematic flow.

Workers of Mahalla

We met Mr el-Fayoumi on the streets of his hometown. He took us past the factory in which he works, along with more than twenty thousand others. He told us that before the January uprising, there had been more than 500 secret

police also employed inside the factory, placed there to keep an eye on the workers. After a failed attempt to gain access we travelled with him through Mahalla's unpaved, narrow, obviously poor, but strikingly clean streets, to a room with dimensions of no more than eight by ten feet from which he told us much of the union activity the town was famous for had been organised. Between seemingly endless phone calls and the arrival of various visitors, mostly his fellow workers, he told us the story of their struggle.

For el-Fayoumi the story of the revolution begins with the Bread Riots of January 18 and 19 in 1977. These were largely spontaneous uprisings that occurred following moves by Sadat, in accordance with IMF and World Bank dictates, to terminate subsidies on basic foodstuffs. Over two days at least 79 protesters were killed, and more than 800 injured. Such violent repression was not enough to quell the unrest, and Sadat was forced to re-introduce the subsidies. The broader policy of *Intifah* (meaning literally, "open door") – an economic re-alignment which was perhaps as key to Egypt's shift in Cold War allegiances as the Camp David agreement or Sadat's salute to the Israeli flag in Jerusalem – continued, though in a slower, more piecemeal fashion.

This generated friction with the working class, but state run unions managed to largely contain the discontent. That started to change, el-Fayoumi told us, in the face of increased anger and labour agitation following "the privatization policies followed by Atef Obeid, Minister of the business sector throughout the late 1990s and until 2003". It was during this period that workers in Mahalla first began to whisper to one another about possible resistance. It wasn't until after "the famous strike on the 12th of the 7th 2006" that they began to really challenge the market's creeping advance into their workplaces and lives.

One of the issues triggering this strike, says el-Fayoumi, was the lack of union freedoms and "the forging of the votes during the union elections that took place in 2006". Mr el-Fayoumi says these elections were rigged to serve the interest of the board director at that time, engineer Mahmoud El Gebaly.

He was getting prepared to run for the parliamentary elections, so he chose some of the followers of the ruling party, the National Party and he helped them win the elections so that they would help him become a member of the parliament, so that he would also have a piece of the cake and the wealth of Egypt, just as was the norm in the reign of the ex-president, or the tyrant or the gang leader, Mohammed Hosni Mubarak.

With official union leadership clearly not fighting for their interests, the workers themselves took the initiative without waiting for permission, starting their strike on the 7th of December to protest low wages, and demanded two months worth of profit sharing.

He describes the three-day stoppage as "the first fuse of this phenomenon in Egypt". He says that, by taking place at "a time when strikes and sit-ins were criminalized by the emergency law" and having management acquiesce to their

demands for the two months' profit share (89 pounds/11.06 euros per worker) the weaving works workers set a precedent that would be empowering for other workers around the country, and dangerous for the bosses.

The experience, he says, also led the workers to realise just how co-opted was their government run yellow union. It had warned its members against demanding exactly this kind of profit sharing.

... we withdrew the trust from the union committee and gathered over 15 thousand signatures, around 60% of the number of workers, to say that this union does not represent us. We took this petition to the president of the general union for the weaving works workers, Said El Gohary, and we also took it to the president of the federation of workers' unions of Egypt, Hussein Mugawer, to tell them that we do not want this union to represent us anymore, but they refused and said that bringing down this union would lead to the disintegration of the whole union system, because the Weaving Works and Textile Company is the largest in terms of numbers of workers.

Spurred on by their victory, and eager for more substantial and permanent improvements – in particular the right to organise independently of state supervision:

They organized a second strike on 23rd of September 2007 to demand the raising of the bonuses and food allowance and work conditions allowance and they demanded a rise of minimum wages to 1200 pounds.

They organized a strike that lasted a week, and at the end of that week the whole world was talking about that strike that was organized by Mahalla weaving works workers, and how it was a peaceful strike, and how the workers did not vandalize the factory and how Mahalla weaving works workers have awareness enough to keep them from acts of vandalism. And this was the point for Mahalla weaving works workers that drove the government - despite the corruption and tyranny that existed at the time - to accept that Mahalla weaving works workers were able to break the long duration of oppression practiced by the government. We were able to get this admission through negotiations with the president of the federation of the workers unions of Egypt, Hussein Mugawer, and the president of the general union for workers of weaving works and textile, Said El Gohary, and President of the holding company, Mohsen Al Gilany, who came to negotiate with 30 of the representatives of the workers. There were no members of the forged and false workers unions present with us, which was counted as the most significant victory of the strike...

...The Mahalla weaving works workers had succeeded in destroying the wall of fear and were able to forcefully practice their right to strike, which gave courage to the rest of the workers to strike. In the protest of 17/2/2008, we as the Mahalla weaving works workers organized a strike and a protest and the people of El Mahalla joined us after the day shift that ended at 3:30 pm and we demanded minimum wages at 1200 and we demanded better living conditions and we demanded to get fair pay for the work we do.

... it was the proof for all the workers of Egypt that Mahalla weaving works workers do not only move for their personal demands but also for all the workers of Egypt, and this was one of the most important moments of the working class history in Egypt and especially Mahalla weaving works workers' history.

After this protest of 17/2/2008, and the collaboration of the people of Mahalla to demand minimum wages of 1200 pounds and bettering the living conditions and economic situation in Egypt, the Mahalla weaving works workers started a famous strike on 6/4/2008 and called on all the Egyptian people to support it so that it would become a day of civil disobedience, and so that it would become a day to revolt in all parts of Egypt. The government took this lightly at first, thinking it was only talk on the part of Mahalla weaving works workers and that it would not happen. But all the classes of the Egyptian people and especially the youth, the young people on Facebook organized a campaign... spreading the word that Mahalla weaving works workers were organizing a day of civil disobedience on the 6th of April. The word started spreading which concerned the government.

The people of El Mahalla El Kubra responded to the call because the demands of the workers were also the demands of the people... bettering living conditions and raising wages, and not only for the Mahalla weaving works workers but for all the workers. Also, at this time, prices were soaring and did not match the wages that the Egyptian people received.

So the people of Mahalla responded. Due to the security situation and the oppressive control of the State Security against all who speak of the rights of the Egyptian people, against those who protest the forging of votes in elections and those who call for better living conditions and freedom for the people, State Security used to summon them and intimidate them into dropping the cause.

All these factors did not scare the Mahalla weaving works workers, and when the government sensed the gravity of the call that we put out, it started sending all the State Security personnel and National Democratic Party to lure Mahalla Weaving Works workers through responding to some of the demands like raising the food allowance... (the food allowance was 38 pounds [4.72 Euro] and they raised it to 90 pounds [11.19 euro]) ... to create discord among the strikers, because they were afraid that a popular revolution was about to break out in the city of Mahalla.

... The demands of the workers on the 6th of April were: minimum wages to be 1200 pounds (149.11 Euros), raising the food allowance 100%, raising monthly bonuses to 50% of the basic salary and raising work conditions allowance to 50 % of the basic salary...

The demands of the Egyptian people were minimum wages at 1200 pounds, lifting the emergency law, ceasing trying civilians in military courts, free elections, bringing down the high prices from which the people suffered, ceasing the privatization that destroyed most the Egyptian public companies...

On the 30th of March, some of the workers were summoned and were warned that if they went through with the strike planned for the 6th of April they would be arrested. This meeting was held with Hussein Mugawer, president of the federation of union workers who is supposed to be advocating the rights of the workers, but who we call the head of the mafia - because Hussein Mugawer is a

businessman not a worker. He is a member in the board of a cement company and specialized in robbing the right of the workers.

I attended this meeting and he clearly stated that the demands of the workers would not be met and that whoever participated in the strike of the 6th of April 2008 would be arrested... he warned that all the political movements like "Kifaya" were only only looking out for their own interest, and they were all talk and no action...

... He produced a document [which stated that there will be no strikes on the 6th of April and that the workers have to double to rate of production] and ordered us to sign it. He threatened the workers during the meeting and said there were 13 arrest orders issued and ready to be used... I refused to sign the document and I told him that Mahalla weaving works workers had not had their demands met yet so they would stage a strike and that they wanted their pay raised.

So he threatened me that this will be my ruin and that no one will hear of me again, so I told him that I was aware of that. Also my mate Wa'el Habib refused to sign... He threatened me directly in that meeting.

Three days before the events of the 6th of April I was summoned by the State Security in Mahalla and they warned me against going through with the strike. I told him I was a worker and I would join the strike because I have demands. On the 6th of April 2008 at 2:30, I was walking with my mate Tarek Amin and suddenly we were approached my ten people from the State Security dressed in civilian clothing and were arrested. We stayed in custody from the 6th of April until the 31st of May after everyone else has been released. We the Mahalla weaving works workers were released last on the 31st of May.

Despite the incarceration of el-Fayoumi and other leaders, and the partial breaking of the strike when some workers were intimidated into returning to their posts, the day was still a momentous one, with the people of Mahalla rising up, and playing out a preview of the scenes that would later rock Cairo, Alexandria and other cities around Egypt:

The people of Al Mahalla reacted to this protest... and revolted against Mubarak's regime demanding that he be brought down in one of the famous squares of Mahalla city. In this protest, on the 6th of April, Mubarak's picture was trampled on the ground and the people chanted for him to leave.

We as the workers say that if the Egyptian people had heeded the call of the weaving works workers on the 6th of April 2008 we would have gotten rid of Mubarak's regime then...

The 25th of January was a natural result to all that has been happening to the Egyptian people since 2006, and was the next step due to the political and social unrest and the oppression of the gang of businessman we call the government through oppression of freedom and the arrest of civilians and trying them in military courts, and this was very evident in the forging of the elections of 2010, and was one of the strong motives that led to the revolution of the 25th of January.

As for the youth of the revolution, I was in contact with them after the first workers strike in Mahalla on 7/12/2006 and we were always meeting, in more than one place, like the Socialist Studies Centre, and the Mubarak Youth Centre and we objected to Mubarak's policies everywhere.

We were in continuous contact with the people of the revolution of the 25th of January since 2006 and our protests and our strikes in which we took part all over Egypt, one of which was the most important was the strike of the workers of Tanta on the pavement of the House of Parliament and that lasted more than 180 days after the company was sold to a Saudi investor (with the consent of Mahmoud Mohye El Din, Minister of Investment and Aisha Abled Hady, Minister of Labour and the president of the federation of the union workers, Hussein Mugawer).

This investor tried to destroy the company so that he could sell the land. The workers of Tanta Linen Company protested. Along with them were all the activists and all the workers of Egypt, most importantly the Mahalla weaving works workers who were in support of their strike. This is one example of the cooperation of the Egyptian people and workers to raise the minimum wage to 1200 pounds.

This took place in March 2010. We staged a protest in front of the Ministry Council to demand the execution of the court order on raising minimum wage. This was a workers protest in front of the council and we announced this to Ahmed Nazeef, the prime minister at the time, to execute the court order and we said that we will return on Labour Day for the same cause until the court order is carried out.

We returned on Labour Day, and our numbers were over ten thousand protestors in front of the council and it showed how the government does not respect the judiciary entity.

This protest included the youth of the 6th of April especially, and the youth of the Socialist Studies Centre and lawyers and activists and others loyal to the cause from the tax sector and Tanta Linen Company. It was a truly epic show of support on Labour Day 2010.

After that the workers and the political activists and all the people of Egypt started interacting and we all went to Abdeen Palace and objected to the inheritance of power and extending the reign of Mubarak. This protest was a true battle with all the people with different classes of workers, employees, politicians and intellectuals against the thuggery of the ruling regime because the security forces tried to break apart the protestors by force but did not succeed due to the large numbers of people. We said that day that we would not allow Hosni Mubarak to give the power to his son because we are not a piece of land or cattle.

These were some examples that showed the solidarity of the workers with the youth of the 25th of January, specifically because we said no after the elections of 2010 and the scandalous forgery that took place. We said that the Egyptian people must rise against this oppressive system... It was the festive day for the police forces and a black day for the Egyptians because of what oppression the police represented to the people. If you look at the budget of the interior ministry it is over 13 billion pounds (1.6 billion Euro) whereas the budget for education does not surpass 2 billion pounds (248 million Euro). The interior

ministry was considered Mubarak's right hand, which he used to oppress all those who opposed him, so it was decided that this protest would be a pay back for all this, to the police and the thugs of the National Democratic Party.

After that we decided as workers, and also the youth of the revolution from 2006 that we would stage a protest in Tahrir Square on the 25th of January. As usual the security forces were there in vast numbers and tried to break up the protest, but failed due to the insistence of the youth that they would not leave until Mubarak's regime was brought down.

My mate Wa'el and I from the Weaving Works in Mahalla were in direct contact with the youth. The sit in continued from the 25th till the 28th, the Friday of Wrath, when all the people went out in a protest, and I was with them, in Mahalla city, at the same time when millions were in Tahrir Square.

On this day, the regime tried in all ways to deny the people their rights... live fire and tear gas and did not succeed... the police retreated due to the determination of millions of the Egyptian people, especially in Tahrir Square, to live in freedom with dignity and to bring to an end the corrupt system under which they live.

My mate Wa'el Habib insisted on traveling to Cairo after these events and I tried to point out to him that there was a curfew and that the military was in control of the whole country, but he said he will go and stay there and he did, and he was there on the day the camels stormed the square and saw all that happened.

On Wednesday I called them and they told me that they were being beaten and killed by people on horses and camels carrying swords and daggers, and many people had been wounded, and that's when I decided to travel to be there too - midnight right after, they told me that they regained control of the square.

I travelled the next day at daybreak. Reaching the square was very difficult, as there were thugs everywhere. I tried to enter Tahrir Square and could not so I returned and tried from another small street, so a man told me to keep going and I will find an entrance where they will ask for my ID and let me in, which they did. Once I entered the square, I met this young lady, her name was Nermin, and she greeted me very warmly. I asked her why she was there even though she was injured, and she said something that I will never forget as long as I am alive. She said, "I'd rather be stabbed by daggers than be ruled by Mubarak". What she said really moved me, this girl of maybe 26 years, and the whole square was full of people who were also aware of their rights and political life and reality.

I stayed in the square all through Thursday and Friday. On Thursday, one young man we have known since 2006, when they saw me they insisted that I give a speech on one of the stages inside the square. I told them I will take a few moments to relax and I started walking through the square to think of what I wanted to say in my speech. As I was walking a man approached me from the state security and addressed me by my name, and told me not to get too animated with the speech because the whole square is full of state security personnel. This really aggravated me, and when I took the stage for the speech I said that this killer Hosni Mubarak is the one who ordered the shooting of the protestors and that he shouldn't only be brought down, but he should also be held accountable for ordering the shooting of the protestors. And I said that the destruction of Egypt can only be blamed on him.

I said that the people owe the youth of the revolution and Mahalla weaving works workers for being the first people that called for bringing down the regime. I stayed with them for 3 days then I travelled home. I went back again on the day he stepped down - Karim and I, we were able to reach the square. The day he stepped down, we watched the glorious cooperation of the people of Egypt on the 11th of February... All kinds of people were there, the workers and employees and farmers and students...

We stayed in the square until sundown then we were planning on moving towards the presidential palace, so we went to pray and by the time we were done, it was being said the president had stepped down. I watched the joy of the people on the 11th of February. That day I said the revolution just started and this is not the end. We as the workers of Egypt have the right to speak, and no one will rob us of this right.

The General Strike

One important part of the story that el-Fayoumi left out was the three-day general strike, which began on February 8th and continued till the dictator had fallen. This – after years of strike actions involving over a million workers, even by conservative estimates – is credited by many as tipping the balance and forcing the generals to move against Mubarak.

The army's higher echelons, it is important to note, are deeply embedded in the Egyptian economic elite. The secrecy around the military budget has allowed the army to amass a loss-free sector of parasitic capitalism, with retiring generals being handed positions managing everything from the manufacture of cooking utensils to the management of luxury hotels. Worker organisation was a direct threat to this closed loop of privilege. It is not surprising that within a week of assuming power the military had issued a decree banning strikes that could harm "the wheel of production". This decree, despite repeated attempts at its enforcement, the harassment of union organisers, and the continued backing of the military for the state run unions, has been far from successful.

In the months immediately following the fall of Mubarak, an unprecedented wave of union activity rolled across the country, in both the public and private sectors of the economy, involving at the very least hundreds of thousands of workers. Outside government buildings in downtown Cairo, the scene of a group of angry workers with placards became the norm. Small, workplace specific actions also occurred. During this period I met the owner of a pharmacy at a posh cafe in the uptown suburb of Zamalek (where the price of a coffee is substantially more than most Egyptians make in a day). He spoke of facing down one such action. 15 employees were threatening strike action if an overbearing manager was not removed. The owner in this case, was able to dismiss and replace the five ringleaders, and intimidate the rest of his staff to drop their complaints. The wave of strikes continued until late September and early October, when they culminated in large scale, nationwide strikes involving teachers, doctors and bus drivers, before settling into a pre-election lull.

Common demands include accountability for bosses, a minimum wage of 1200 Egyptian pounds (148 Euros) per months, and a maximum wage of 15000 Egyptian pounds (1,854 Euros). Many of those in casual labour demanded full time contracts with fixed pay. Often, specific figures in management are the focus of worker rage, with the central demands of some strikes being the removal of the authority figures who have loomed large over them until now.

An independent trade union began to form, built around the independent Real Estate Tax Collectors union, which had been successfully established following major demonstrations in 2010, including a thousands-strong sit in outside the cabinet building.

I met with the president of this trade union federation, Kamal Abo Aitta, (who is also the president of the Real Estate Tax Collectors Union), in the days immediately following the first round of voting for Egypt's new parliament. Our interview took place outside a tent that the independent trade union has maintained as part of the latest Tahrir sit-in, which is this time directed at the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) – the self appointed generals who have assumed executive power since the ousting of Mubarak.

The SCAF, said Mr Abo Aitta, is currently the only thing stopping the removal of the 1976 law that controls union organization, with the ministry of manpower and by the legislative authorities having already given their consent. As well as this obstruction to changing laws, the SCAF and the business elite have acted directly to suppress union activity, with many striking workers beaten, arrested and put before military courts, sacked, or having their wages docked.

Despite this he says that independent union membership has reached 2 million. This number is seen as unrealistically high by some, but is impossible to independently verify, in part because of the loose association that fledgling unions, many of them formed in single workplaces, have with the central body. As Mr Abo Aitta points out, there are cases where employers have refused to recognise the wishes of their employees to associate with the new federation, and continue to deduct union fees from wages and pay them to the government run unions. In some cases this is occurring at the same time as the new union leadership politically aligns itself with the independent movement.

According to Mr Abo Aitta, other problems facing the new union movement include the fact that in many cases, workers have been paying dues to the old state run unions for years, and have amassed pension plans, which they fear losing should they change memberships. Female workers have also been told they cannot use union run childcare facilities that would allow them to work, and in some cases the bosses and officials from the state run unions have asked their husbands to sign letters forbidding their wives from joining the independent unions. (The role of women in defying the state run unions and spurring this fresh workers movement into being is worthy of much independent investigation, as there is a whole universe of extra difficulties they have faced.)

In an important aside, he mentioned that one independent union had even been founded inside a factory run by the military. While so far this is the only such uprising in the military owned sector, that even one workplace has managed to defy the generals' "iron fist", at a time when the military still enjoys seeming impunity, is enough to inspire many of the possibilities of future union actions.

In any case, says Mr Abo Aitta, the strikes will continue regardless of the formal status of workers and their unions. Minimum and maximum wages (though promised) have not yet been paid. Administrators from the Mubarak era are still in place in ministries and in the workplaces and working against union freedoms. The revolution, he points out, has not yet done the work of the workers in terms of social justice.

One factor that seems to be slowing the revolution on all fronts is the growing diffusion of political emphasis. The bourgeois political groups have been focussed on ending the SCAF's rule, and on the establishment of solid political rights, while the union movement has been focussed on the specific demands of the workers in the hundreds or possibly thousands of workplaces across the country where actions are taking place. Meanwhile, political parties competing in the formal political system seem caught up in identity debates about the secular or Islamic nature of the Egyptian nation, with most voters settling for the apparent compromise presented by the Muslim Brotherhood's party, Freedom and Justice.

However, in working to topple the "mini-Mubaraks" in factories and offices around the country, they are still doing the work of the revolution – focussing on their immediate reality, rather than the national political leadership, which has been the focus of the twitter crowd.

However, given the undeniable links between the army's power over parliament, its unsupervised military budget, its sprawling commercial interests, its tendency toward repression, and its general political obstructionism, it is not hard to imagine how these forces could once more align and push forward for change.

About the author

Austin Mackell is an Australian freelance journalist with a progressive outlook and special interest in the Middle East. He reported from Lebanon during the 2006 Israeli invasion, Iran during the turbulent 2009 elections, and recently moved to Cairo to report on the transition to democracy. He tweets as [@austingmackell](https://twitter.com/austingmackell) and blogs at [The Moon Under Water](http://TheMoonUnderWater.com). The front and back covers of this issue of *Interface* also feature Austin's photographs.

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