

Nov 04, 2016 by Philip Seib

The Energy of Revolution ^[1]

DOHA --- In past sessions of the Al Jazeera Forum, held each year in the network's Qatar hometown, reform in the Arab world was discussed with an air of resignation: "Someday...maybe."

But at this year's forum, which took place earlier this week, the air was alive with the joy of realized dreams. Many of the attendees were young and vibrant, proud of what they have accomplished during the past few months and looking to the future with cautious but energetic optimism. Asma Mahfouz, a veteran of Cairo's Tahrir Square, underscored the new sense of pride within the region when she said, "We told everyone, 'Hold your heads high, you are Egyptians,' and now we say, 'Hold your heads high, you are Arabs.'"

It was a remarkable few days, as young bloggers mixed with the likes of former Brazilian president Luiz Lula de Silva and Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Al Jazeera was an appropriate host because since the channel's birth 15 years ago it has been bringing new openness to the region's life, challenging convention and stimulating conversation about previously forbidden topics. In this time of revolution, Al Jazeera provided information that first intensified anger and then helped spur action.

During the past few years satellite television has been joined by social media in reweaving the fabric of civil society in the Arab world. YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other such tools played significant roles in mobilizing millions who took to the streets this year. But television is far from obsolete; in this region, Al Jazeera and other satellite channels are far more accessible than are Internet-based media, and it was television's coverage of events in Tunisia that Egyptians saw and thought, "Why not us?"

Not everyone at the forum was young. Tariq al-Bishri, a veteran Egyptian jurist and chair of the committee that is revising Egypt's constitution, offered his audience a lesson about past revolutions and spoke about the need to build an open and sustainable political party system. It is beginning to dawn on even the youngest and most enthusiastic of the revolutionaries that exuberance can carry them for only so long. Revolution may reach glorious heights on the streets, accompanied by great exhilaration. But as the supply of political adrenalin diminishes, people realize that lasting change comes through reforming institutions, which can prove an even more daunting process than knocking Hosni Mubarak from his perch.

Tunisian blogger Malek Khadraoui told the forum audience, "We have learned not to bow our heads to despotism." That defiant courage characterized most of the veterans of the Arab streets, but battles remain to be fought. Omar Abdulkarim Abushah, a member of the Libyan resistance, was warmly applauded when he said, "The Libyan people have run out of tears."

But an hour later, I saw Abushah sitting by himself, a Libyan flag draped around his shoulders, seemingly close to tears himself as the latest grim news filtered in from his homeland.

Hope abounds, but the revolution is not yet won.
