



REUTERS/DYLAN MARTINEZ

Google Inc executive Wael Ghonim addresses a mass crowd inside Tahrir Square in Cairo February 8, 2011.

## People power against powerful people

BY JOE MARTIN  
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**D**arkness engulfed Cairo, Egypt. It's past midnight. A young man walks in the street's dim light. In one startling moment he is set upon by three men: "You will regret it if you scream," he was told.

Stuffed into a car's backseat he is handcuffed, his belongings confiscated. His shirt is used to blindfold him.

Thus begins Wael Ghonim's ordeal as a prisoner of Hosni Mubarak, then president of Egypt. An unexpected revolutionary, Ghonim helped spark events that would overthrow Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for 30 years. For 12 days he remained handcuffed, blindfolded and alone. His gripping work "Revolution 2.0" recounts how he ignited an uprising and endured captivity.

Ghonim is married, a father and ensconced within Egypt's middle class. A technophile, he is a valued employee of Google. It's a dream job: "The Internet had been instrumental in shaping my experiences as well as my character," he says. "It was through the Internet that I was able to enter the world of communications (when I was barely 18) and network with hundreds of young people from my generation everywhere around the world. Like everyone else, I enjoyed spending long hours in front of a screen on chat programs. I built a network of virtual relations with people, most of whom I never met in person."

Ghonim could have focused on family and career; he could have avoided the repressive forces of Mubarak. But like many Egyptians of all classes, Ghonim had grown disgusted with the stranglehold Mubarak's regime had on the country. Issues of poverty and unemployment fomented anger and resentment at all levels of society.

In late 2010 turbulent events erupted in neighboring Tunisia. A poor fruit seller "had his cart confiscated by a police woman, and when he complained to her, she allegedly slapped his face, humiliating him in front of everyone." Later the desperate man returned to police headquarters and immolated

himself in protest. He died of his burns. Outraged Tunisians took to the streets. They soon ousted their corrupt president. Suddenly Egyptians realized they might do the same. By deft utilization of the Internet, Facebook and Twitter, Ghonim found himself in the vanguard of a people's rebellion.

By 2010 he was already engaged in subversive activities. On viewing the image of a dead man on Facebook, Ghonim describes his revulsion: "It was a horrifying photo showing the distorted face of a man in his twenties. There was a big pool of blood behind his head, which rested on a chunk of marble. His face was extremely disfigured and bloodied; his lower lip had been ripped in half, and his jaw was seemingly dislocated. His front teeth appeared to be missing, and it looked as if they had been beaten right out of his mouth. The image was so gruesome that I wondered if he had been wounded in war."

The man was Khaled Mohamed Said, who died in Alexandria at the hands of secret police. It was Ghonim's transformative moment: "I could not stand by passively in the face of grave injustice. I decided to employ all my skills and experience to demand justice for Khaled Said and to help expose his story to vigorous public debate. It was time to lay bare the corrupt practices of the Ministry of the Interior, our repressive regime's evil right hand."

Ghonim created a Facebook page titled "We Are All Khaled Said" and aimed it at a broad audience. The response was swift. Events known as "Silent Stands" were organized and encouraged involvement of a wide array of citizens.

"Inspired by Gandhi and other advocates of nonviolent resistance, I was keen to stress regularly that our activities were to remain peaceful at all costs. Gandhi is certainly one of my heroes," says Ghonim. "I have enjoyed reading many books about his philosophy and about how he revived ahimsa, the ancient Indian religious principle of nonviolence toward all living things."

But any threat to Mubarak's rule would be dealt with severely. Though Ghonim had

tried to remain anonymous, he was eventually captured. While stating it is difficult "to convey the psychological torture" he suffered, he admits isolation and solitary confinement is especially difficult for a technophile: "The deafening silence and blinding darkness could effectively render a human being insane, and for an Internet addict like myself, who thrived on communication and whose phone and e-mail never ceased their activity, it really was unbearable."

Events took on their own momentum in Tahrir Square. Ghonim had no idea of the eruption's magnitude. Mubarak's efforts at damage control proved futile.

People demanded fundamental change. Days before the president's resignation, Ghonim was freed: "One can only learn the value of freedom when it is lost. Imagine losing your freedom to move, to see, and to use your hands, not for a few hours but for days, with no idea what might happen next."

At the time he was writing the book, Ghonim and other Egyptians were awaiting the election of a new president: "Inevitably, in the wake of the fervor and unity of the revolution, public opinion has fractured, uncertainties have swirled, and we are still a long way from a fully established democracy. I do not pretend to have a crystal ball that can foretell Egypt's future, but I do believe that Egyptians will never again put up with another pharaoh."

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