

**Camouflage and Confrontation: The Trajectories of  
Musicians Cairokee and Ramy Essam in post-Tahrir  
Square Egypt**

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# **Camouflage and Confrontation: The Trajectories of Musicians Cairokee and Ramy Essam in post-Tahrir Square Egypt**

Joshua Michael Opatz

## Introduction

On December 17<sup>th</sup>, 2010, a Tunisian street Vendor named Mohammed Bouazizi self-immolated in front of the local governor's offices to protest his unfair treatment at the hands of police.<sup>1</sup> Bouazizi lingered in the hospital for several weeks before dying, but his death sparked waves of protests across the country that culminated in Tunisia's long time president Ben Ali stepping down.<sup>2</sup> This started a domino effect of protests across the region that would come to be known as the Arab Spring. On January 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the Arab Spring came to Egypt in what was known as "The Day of Rage," a planned day of protest at Cairo's Tahrir Square in response to the death of youth Khalid Said at the hands of police in June of the previous year.<sup>3</sup> The protest broke all expectations as hundreds of thousands of people came out into the streets across Egypt to protest against the numerous injustices of Hosni Mubarak's government which at this point had been in power for almost thirty years.<sup>4</sup> By February 11<sup>th</sup>, Mubarak had been forced to resign by the protests and it seemed like another major victory for the nascent Arab Spring.<sup>5</sup> Journalists from around the world were

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media: The Egyptian Popular Insurrection and the Internet* (London: Verso, 2014), 92.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media*, 49, 113-115.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> "Timeline: Egypt's revolution", al-Jazeera, al-Jazeera Media Network. Feb. 13, 2011, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/01/201112515334871490.html>.

quick to pick up on what seemed to be a watershed moment in the Arab world and special attention was paid to topics that highlighted the youthful and innovative spirit of the movement, such as the role of social media and music in the protests.<sup>6</sup> However, many of the conclusions drawn in the media proved to be premature.

It has been just over a decade since the start of the Arab Spring as of the time of this writing and its legacy today is a shadow of the hope it once embodied. Many of the protest movements it inspired were repressed by security forces or spiraled into civil wars.<sup>7</sup> In Egypt, Mubarak's resignation was followed by the frustrating tenure of the democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi whose administration fell victim to a coup launched by the military, leading to the consolidation of power under the current president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.<sup>8</sup> In retrospect, some of the ways the protests were praised by the global media seems more than a bit naïve; these "Twitter revolutions" could not single handedly topple decades old regimes with the powers of technology and democratic idealism alone, no matter how optimistic one's outlook was.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Emily Banks, "Egyptian president steps down amidst groundbreaking digital revolution," CNN, Cable News Network, Feb. 11, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/TECH/social.media/02/11/egyptian.president.digital.mashable/index.html>; Mike Giglio, "Inside Egypt's Facebook Revolt," Newsweek, Newsweek, Feb. 27, 2011, <https://www.newsweek.com/inside-egypts-facebook-revolt-66791>.

<sup>7</sup> Kelly McEvers, "Bahrain: The Revolution That Wasn't," NPR, NPR, Jan. 5, 2012, <https://www.npr.org/2012/01/05/144637499/bahrain-the-revolution-that-wasnt>; Kali Robinson, "The Arab Spring at Ten Years: What's the Legacy of the Uprisings?" Council on Foreign Relations, Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 3, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings>.

<sup>8</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution and its Aftermath: 2011-2016* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2017), 108, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Maeve Sherlaw, "Egypt five years on: was it ever a 'social media revolution'?" The Guardian, Guardian News & Media Limited, Jan. 25, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/25/egypt-5-years-on-was-it-ever-a-social-media-revolution>; Killian Clarke and Korhan Korcak, "Eight years after Egypt's revolution, here's what

However, the flawed assumptions of foreign news correspondents should not reflect negatively on their subjects, the millions of Egyptians from all walks of life who participated in the Tahrir Square protests and beyond. Despite the discouraging direction the Egyptian revolution took, these people continued to advocate for the goals of the revolution and survive its aftermath even when the cameras were turned away. This study aims to document the trajectories of one section of the protest movement that received considerable media attention in the early days of the protests: the popular musicians who wrote the political anthems that became the so-called “soundtrack” of the revolution. Furthermore, this study will also examine the potential reasons for why certain artists ended up where they did.

To do this, this study will compare and contrast the careers of two prominent protest artists of Tahrir Square, Cairokee, with its singer Amir Eid, and Ramy Essam. Using multi-modal close readings and comparative analysis, this study will demonstrate that both of these protest-rock artists, though they got their start in the same time and place of the Egyptian revolution, would find themselves gradually pushed apart in how they approached the topic of Egyptian politics throughout the course of the revolution. Cairokee would quickly rise to fame as the musical face of the Tahrir movement before finding themselves adrift in the morass of the post-Mubarak era, finally settling into a successful, if fraught, pop career where their politics are increasingly obscured by self-censorship.

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we’ve learned about social media and protest,” The Washington Post, The Washington Post, Jan. 25, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2019/01/25/eight-years-after-egypts-revolution-heres-what-weve-learned-about-social-media-and-protest/>.

Ramy Essam on the other hand would make waves with his confrontational style and grittier approach to protest music, ultimately finding himself exiled from Egypt where he continued true to form up to the release of his hit “Balaha,” a song that has gained a veritable body count. Furthermore, this study asserts that how the careers and texts of the subject artists changed with the course of the revolution was influenced largely by the slight yet determinative differences in their personalities and the social background they came from.

### The Artists

With the premise of the study established, we will briefly discuss the background of its two subject artists, Cairokee and Ramy Essam. This study will focus on these artists due to the fact that they lacked relevancy before the protests and that their careers were subsequently defined by the experience of Tahrir Square. This then allows for the evolution of their textual themes to be charted and compared along with the evolution of Egypt’s political situation after the revolution. This is in addition to their relative similarity in their mostly rock based musical style, which makes similarities and divergences in their presentation and themes easier to track. Indeed, the musical and visual texts of these artists would subsequently continue to diverge in the coming months and years of political intrigue. To satisfactorily track this divergence, it will be necessary to first profile the origins of these two artists and chronicle their actions during the early days of Tahrir Square to understand the contexts in which their music was made.

The first artist this study will examine is Cairokee. Formed in 2003, Cairokee existed largely off the international or even Egyptian national radar for much of their career as they played as a cover band in bars in college neighborhoods of Cairo, performing to a mostly upper-middle class crowd.<sup>10</sup> This changed rather quickly as Cairokee released a music video for their protest song “Sout al-Horeya” that was filmed at Tahrir Square and released on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2011, one day before Mubarak’s resignation, and amassed over 2 million views in the next few days.<sup>11</sup> This viral success quickly garnered attention and Cairokee gained notoriety around the world, up to and including licensing their music to be used in Pepsi ads.<sup>12</sup> Cairokee would release another popular protest song “Ya el-Medan” several months later during the transitional SCAF period featuring guest star Aida El Ayouby.<sup>13</sup> This was soon followed up by another hit “Ethbat Makanak,” which had its music video released on the Youtube channel of Bassem Youssef, a news show host and an influential voice of Egypt’s opposition at the time.<sup>14</sup> Cairokee would themselves appear at anti-Morsi demonstrations again in 2013 but have largely faded from the mainstream political spotlight since

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<sup>10</sup> Cairokeeofficial, “About,” Youtube, Google, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/c/Cairokeeofficial/about>; Carolyn Ramzy, “The Revolution Did Not Take Place”: Hidden Transcripts of Cairokee’s Post- Revolution Rock Music,” *Music & Politics* 14, No. 1 (Winter 2020): 5.

<sup>11</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya صوت الحريه Amir Eid - Hany Adel - Hawary On Guitar & Sherif On Keyboards,” Youtube, Google, Feb. 11, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw\\_zfLLvh8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8); “VIDEO: Egypt Seed’s ‘Voice of Freedom’ protest video from Tahrir Square goes viral,” Seeds of Peace, Seeds of Peace, Feb. 12, 2011, <https://www.seedsofpeace.org/egyptian-seeds-voice-of-freedom-video-from-tahrir-square-goes-viral/>.

<sup>12</sup> Pepsi Masr, “Pepsi Egypt new ad 2011: Express Yourself,” Youtube, Google, May 11, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOV7B1WtbYw&ab\\_channel=PepsiMasr](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOV7B1WtbYw&ab_channel=PepsiMasr).

<sup>13</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee ft Aida El Ayouby Ya El Medan و عايدہ الايوبى,” Youtube, Google, Nov. 29, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umIJJFVgYVI&ab&ab>.

<sup>14</sup> BassemYoussefShow, “Cairokee - Ethbat Makanak كايروكي - اثبت مكانك,” Youtube, Google, Jan. 24, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYoCS7i0Slq&ab>.

then as the Sisi government solidified its hold over Egypt, their political aspirations being restricted to their music for which they continue to attract censorship from the government.<sup>15</sup> This shift has not coincided with any commercial or critical decline as Cairokee's subsequent albums have continued to receive praise and their accompanying music videos receive view counts that are equal to or significantly exceed their original protest songs as their musical style branches out to genres such as pop, hip hop, and RnB<sup>16</sup>.

Our next artist is Ramy Essam. In 2011, Essam was an amateur musician and student with a fondness for heavy metal from Mansoura who traveled to Cairo in their early days of the protests in order to take part in them.<sup>17</sup> There he composed and sang impromptu protest songs to large crowds and became a fixture of Tahrir Square. Recordings of one of these songs with the name "Irhal" went viral with several hundred thousand views among different uploads.<sup>18</sup> Similarly to Cairokee, Essam would continue to be present at the ensuing protests but observed that by 2013, his music was no longer resonating with the crowds present as it had before as Egypt's political crisis became increasingly dominated by competing Islamist and pro-military factions.<sup>19</sup> And unlike Cairokee,

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<sup>15</sup> Mark LeVine, "The Revolution Never Ends: Music, Protest and Rebirth in the Arab World," in *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring*, edited by Larbi Sadiki (London: Routledge, 2015), 363; Nadine Marroushi, "Raging in the Street," *The National*, International Media Investments, Feb. 20, 2014, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/arts-culture/raging-in-the-street-1.304117>; Mada Masr, "Censorship Board Bans Cairokee's New Album," *Mada Masr*, Mada, July 5, 2017, <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2017/07/05/news/culture/censorship-board-bans-songs-from-cairokees-new-album/>.

<sup>16</sup> Cairokeeofficial, "Videos," Youtube, Google, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/c/Cairokeeofficial/videos>.

<sup>17</sup> LeVine, "The Revolution Never Ends," 354.

<sup>18</sup> Itai Anghel, "Ramy Essam - The real revolution song of Tahrir square," Youtube, Google, Feb. 25, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rEKmTBKiBM>.

<sup>19</sup> LeVine, "The Revolution Never Ends," 363, 355.

his success did not translate to the same level of commercial support and Essam's international notoriety was reserved to talk shows such as 60 Minutes or performances at NGOs as opposed to product endorsements.<sup>20</sup> However, Essam has continued his musical career and political activism despite his exile from Egypt to Sweden in 2014 with a healthy number of fans and supporters in the NGO community.<sup>21</sup> In the vein of Cairokee, he also continually diversifies his musical approach within a number of genres.

### Literature Review

The impact of protest musicians on the Egyptian Revolution was of immediate academic interest to scholars and many studies concerning both Cairokee and Ramy Essam have been published. However, only a few of these studies take a long-term approach to their analysis of the musicians' texts and fewer still attempt in-depth analytical comparisons of the two together, most of them only focusing on the music covered in the previous profiles section of this study. As was stated before, this study aims to observe the career trajectory of Cairokee and Ramy Essam from the start of the Egyptian Revolution through its aftermath and up to the current day by undertaking a multi-modal close reading

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<sup>20</sup> Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam at 60 Minutes - CBS News تعذيب رامى عصام 9 مارس," Youtube, Google, Oct. 13, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYZUz\\_wux-s&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UYZUz_wux-s&ab_channel=RamyEssam); Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam - MelaTalk at Mela festival 2012, Oslo," Youtube, Google, Aug. 27, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrYGrg-JJHs&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YrYGrg-JJHs&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>21</sup> The World Staff, "This Egyptian musician's passport was revoked for his political songs. He still can't wait to go home again," PRI, PRX, Jan. 10, 2019, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-01-10/egyptian-musicians-passport-was-revoked-his-political-songs-he-still-cant-wait-go>; "Ramy Essam, AR-Resident at Safe Haven Helsinki," Artists at Risk, Perpetuum Mobile, Oct. 8, 2016, <https://artistsatrisk.org/2016/10/18/ramy-essam-back-helsinki-3-month-safe-haven-helsinki-residency/?lang=en>.

that will analyze the music videos of both artists. In order to provide sufficient background as to why this approach is valuable, this study will provide a brief overview of the previous scholarly approaches and developments regarding the two subject artists.

Two of the first scholarly articles to be published on the subject were Ted Swedenburg's "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha" and Mark LeVine's "Music and the Aura of Revolution," both published in 2012 not long after both artists had attracted worldwide attention with their music. The two studies are chiefly preoccupied with analyzing what the composition of these initial songs meant within the context of the Revolution. Swedenburg's argument asserts that the music composed and performed at Tahrir Square by the likes of Ramy Essam and Cairokee was not a "soundtrack" or even a reflection of the revolution, as major media outlets had a habit of labeling it.<sup>22</sup> Rather, Swedenburg argues that the music was "integrally tied to and imbedded within the social movement," meaning that the music was a tool within the larger revolutionary process or that the composition of this music was itself a revolutionary act.<sup>23</sup> Swedenburg also points to other genres of music such as mahragan, or "electro-sha'bi," as musical styles that are just as if not more "reflective" of Egyptian society and its tastes at large that did not get global media attention rather than hip hop and rock music, especially among the working class people who made up the majority of the protests.<sup>24</sup> LeVine on the other hand

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<sup>22</sup> Ted Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest: From Sayyid Darwish to DJ Haha," *Middle East Report* 42, No. 265 (Winter 2012): 39.

<sup>23</sup> Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest," 39-40.

<sup>24</sup> Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest," 42.

argues that this music is in fact a reflection of Egyptian society as “music is society,” but specifically a reflection with refractal properties that brings the sentiments of the subaltern to the surface.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, LeVine argues that this reflection of subaltern realities through music restores its “aura” vis-à-vis the degradation it suffers via the culture industry as understood by Adorno.<sup>26</sup> In sum, according to LeVine, the music performed at Tahrir Square both magnified the sentiments of those not often heard by the system while simultaneously restoring the “authenticity” of these musical forms.<sup>27</sup>

This study will not be framing itself within the debate of whether or not the music of Tahrir and beyond is a reflection of Egypt. This is chiefly because the question of reflections was mostly in response to trends of how the music was portrayed in the media and limited in time to the initial reactions to the protests. As this study will be traveling far beyond the confines of 2011-2012, this dichotomy is not necessary, and the study will treat the texts both as reflections of Egyptian society and as integral parts of the revolution interchangeably. What this study will be taking from these two approaches are how they begin to interrogate the role of class in the music of Tahrir, both as a reflection of society and means of revolution. Mark LeVine seems to identify Ramy Essam as a shining example of working-class reality reflected through music, using evidence outside of Essam’s music itself to back this up.<sup>28</sup> Swedenburg on the other hand

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<sup>25</sup> Mark LeVine, “Music and the Aura of Revolution,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44, No. 4 (November 2012): 794.

<sup>26</sup> LeVine, “Music and the Aura of Revolution,” 797.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> LeVine, “Music and the Aura of Revolution,” 794.

paints a more complicated picture. He identifies what LeVine sees as Essam's reflection of working-class reality as an attempt to place himself within the historical canon of Egypt's revolutionary music.<sup>29</sup> For Swedenburg, the integral working-class element of Egypt's revolutionary music is found in mahragan music, but he insists that both this and Essam's use of a "classical revolutionary repertoire" have roles to play in Egypt's political future.<sup>30</sup> Thus, this study will keep an eye out for how topics of class in the music of Ramy Essam and Cairokee manifest themselves both as unconscious reflections of the state of Egyptian society/the revolution as well as means by which the artists continue to shape the revolution and its legacy.

Subsequent studies would take a similar approach to what this study will be using in regard to the question of reflection vs function. Both Nadia Shalaby's "A Multimodal Analysis of Selected Cairokee Songs of the Egyptian Revolution and their Representation of Women" and "Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution" by Anastasia Valassopoulos & Dalia Said Mostafa, published in 2015 and 2014 respectively, combine the two, seeing the music of Tahrir as reflective and functional at the same time. Shalaby asserts that: "...music is used as a mode, primarily to fulfill an interpersonal function, expressing the different emotional states of the protesters as they shift from elation to disillusionment... also fulfill(s) an ideational function, reflecting the shift from unity to division."<sup>31</sup> Likewise, Valassopoulos argues that the music of Tahrir

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<sup>29</sup> Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest," 41.

<sup>30</sup> Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest," 43.

<sup>31</sup> Nadia A. Shalaby, "A multimodal analysis of selected Cairokee songs of the Egyptian revolution and their representation of women," *Journal for Cultural Research* 19, No. 2 (Spring 2015): 192.

“...shape(s) and articulate(s) emerging desires and aspirations as well as participating in criticisms and grievances at the site of political change,” and “that it has been two-way process: the events on the ground impacting the music and the music responding and articulating the story.”<sup>32</sup> Due to the evolving consensus on the dual capacity of the music of Tahrir to both reflect the society it came out of and to shape the protest movement that seeks to change that society, this study is confident in applying this understanding to its own long-term analysis.

These two studies are also critical to the development of scholarship on the music of Tahrir as they are the first to expand the timeframe within which the music is studied. Both studies deal chiefly with Cairokee’s music from the start of Tahrir up through the SCAF period approaching the military coup. This allows them to identify developments across subsequent musical texts as the political situation in Egypt changes. As was previously demonstrated by Shalaby, this sort of analysis was able to document “the shift from elation to disillusionment, to dejection” found in Cairokee’s music as they reacted to the changes happening around them.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Shalaby’s explicit use of a multimodal analysis to analyze the lyrical, visual, and sonic elements of Cairokee’s music videos allowed the study to observe the fullest range of signs present in the texts that identify the reflections and functions of the revolution present within them. Because of the advantages of an explicitly multi-modal approach, this study will

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<sup>32</sup> Anastasia Valassopoulos and Dalia Said Mostafa, “Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution,” *Popular Music and Society* 37, No. 5 (Oct. 2014): 638, 650-651.

<sup>33</sup> Shalaby, “A multimodal analysis of selected Cairokee songs,” 192.

also be adopting said approach so we can identify the developments in the themes of the subject texts over a much longer period.

Mark LeVine provided an updated contribution to the literature with his study “The Revolution Never Ends: Music, Protest and Rebirth in the Arab World” published in 2015. The study provides an updated interpretation of LeVine’s “aura” thesis in regard to revolutionary music. While his initial assertions in the immediate aftermath of the protests were quite optimistic in describing the music of Ramy Essam and others as possessing a sort of “authenticity” revitalizing “aura,” he now tempers this assertion within the context of the events that happened since. He uses the difficulties that both Ramy Essam and Cairokee faced after Tahrir Square to observe that his “aura” stage of revolutionary music production wears off and is limited to the initial stages of said revolution.<sup>34</sup> This is followed by a so-called “grind” period after the initial euphoria has worn off and reaction to the revolution has set in where those who are still committed to it labor to keep it alive.<sup>35</sup> He also notes that Essam’s more subversive musical style has made this more difficult for him than Cairokee, ultimately leading to his exile.<sup>36</sup> He concludes that because the original artists of Tahrir continue to pursue their music in changing forms under the pressure of the post-Tahrir environment, these artists help to keep the revolution alive until its next phase manifests.<sup>37</sup> Thus, for LeVine, the revolution has not yet ended.

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<sup>34</sup> LeVine, “The Revolution Never Ends,” 362.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> LeVine, “The Revolution Never Ends,” 364.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

In this study, LeVine provides the most in-depth side by side comparison of the careers of Essam and Cairokee to date, yet he leaves many questions open. His observation of differing results under the pressure of the state's reaction against the artists prompts questions about the role of class in Essam's music, which LeVine identified previously as an important part of Essam's significance. Is Essam's musical subversiveness, both in the content of his lyrics and his preference towards a metal-influenced style, and his subsequent diminished market success, due in part to his class background as LeVine previously talked about? Furthermore, what does the long-term outlook of this "grind" period look like? What does it mean for "the revolution (to) never end?" Does that mean it is continually evolving in the theoretical sense of a permanent revolution?<sup>38</sup> Or is it rather placed on a metaphorical treadmill where it never concludes, and thus, never succeeds? These questions unfortunately go unanswered as LeVine's study is limited both in the duration of analysis for its "grind" period and its inability to further interrogate the factor of social class in the status of the "grind" as he is preoccupied with updating his previous assertions about the "aura." However, the fact that LeVine identifies the diverging trajectories of Cairokee and Ramy Essam in the post-revolution period will be pivotal in our study as we dive further into more texts of the so-called "grind" period using multi-modal analysis to ascertain just how they keep the "aura" of revolution alive to differing results.

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<sup>38</sup> Regi Pilling, "What is Permanent Revolution?" *Socialist Review*, Socialist Review, Sep. 2011, <http://socialistreview.org.uk/361/what-permanent-revolution>.

One of the pieces of scholarship most critical to this study is Carolyn Ramzy's "The Revolution Did Not Take Place: Hidden Transcripts of Cairokee's Post-Revolution Rock Music," published in 2020. This study takes a long-term approach to analyzing Cairokee's music videos, beginning with "Sout al-Horeya" and ending in 2017. Ramzy identifies a significant shift in Cairokee's videos released after the ascension of the Sisi regime that convey disillusionment with the state of the revolution.<sup>39</sup> In particular, her analysis picks up on Cairokee's use of "quiet politics" such as sarcasm, self-censorship, and ambiguity as means of subverting the Egyptian state's attempts to censor them.<sup>40</sup> However, Ramzy further identifies how Cairokee's employment of these tactics actually "replicate" the class divides that so bedeviled the protest movement.<sup>41</sup> She describes Cairokee's ability to retreat into digital spaces and self-censor as privileges afforded to them by their class, thus separating them from the working-class Egyptians who made up the majority of the Tahrir Square protests.<sup>42</sup>

In this context, Ramzy paints a picture of a revolution that has stalled and compartmentalized, its various factions going their own ways in their attempts to survive the regime and thus placing the progress of the revolution on an indefinite hold. Indeed, in contrast to LeVine's conception of the "grind" of post-Tahrir artists as the "revolution never ending," Ramzy identifies what LeVine would call Cairokee's "grind" as contributing to a state where it might as well be

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<sup>39</sup> Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 3.

<sup>40</sup> Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 4.

<sup>41</sup> Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 4.

that “the revolution did not take place at all.”<sup>43</sup> As one of the most recent contributions to the literature, Ramzy’s piece demonstrates the value of using a long-term approach to analyzing the legacy of the music of Tahrir. Her analysis of music videos spanning the better part of a decade allows for her analysis to be informed by a multitude of personal and political developments that further allow her to identify new trends in the subject with precision and detail. The success Ramzy achieves by employing this strategy is a key reason why it is being employed again here. Simultaneously, I expand upon her approach to include music videos released outside of the timeframe of her study and to include Ramy Essam’s videos for a side-by-side career comparison.

The value of this approach can be further demonstrated in contrast to David A. McDonald’s 2019 study “Framing the “Arab Spring”: Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media.” McDonald provides an even more rigorous deconstruction of the portrayal of the music of Tahrir in global media than Swedenburg did in 2012.<sup>44</sup> However, because of the limited timeframe from which he draws his material, his analysis makes some seemingly outdated or uncritical statements about mentioned artists, particularly Ramy Essam. Essam is used as a foil to hip hop as an example of music that received less attention in the global media and represented broader class interests that did not receive attention either.<sup>45</sup> This sort of assertion should be understood by now to be lacking as it doesn’t pick up on other musical styles such as mahragan that are

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<sup>43</sup> Ramzy, “The Revolution Did Not Take Place,” 17.

<sup>44</sup> David A. McDonald, “Framing the “Arab Spring:” Hip Hop, Social Media, and the American News Media,” *Journal of Folklore Research* 56, No. 1 (April 2019): 105-106.

<sup>45</sup> McDonald, “Framing the “Arab Spring,” 108.

perhaps even more representative of Egyptian social classes and pays no attention to the challenging career developments that have happened to the artists since then. This is especially apparent when one considers the gap in time between when this study was published and timeframe it covers, at least six years. By contrast, Ramzy uses the length of time that has passed since the heady days of the early Revolution to analyze Cairokee's interactions with class through numerous subsequent texts. She weaves her analysis back into the likes of Swedenburg's as she discusses how Cairokee has appropriated sonic elements of sha'bi music into later releases as a way to capture a working-class audience they have often struggled to connect with.<sup>46</sup> The class dynamics in play between rock-based Egyptian protest music and the more locally popular sha'bi mahragan style were some of the first themes to be examined by Swedenburg and Ramzy uses her expanded timeframe of analysis to contribute a fresh perspective on them as opposed to McDonald. By using a long-term approach for the texts covered here, this study hopes to expand these ideas even further.

Through this overview it has become evident that readings of artists responding to changes in the political landscape as well as interactions with social class are prevalent in scholarly analyses of the music of Tahrir. However, these readings often clash with each other or find themselves operating under very different base assumptions. Significant opportunities for context and comparison are lost in studies that have limited timeframes or only focus on one artist. Through a combination of long-term, multi-modal close readings and

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<sup>46</sup> Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 10, 17.

comparative analysis, this study will be able to greatly expand upon and interrogate the findings of earlier offerings of the literature with its own original analysis. In doing so, the study will provide one of the most comprehensive readings of the legacy of the music of Tahrir. However, it will not be exhaustive, as it will concern only the two well-known artists of political Egyptian rock music discussed already, Ramy Essam and Cairokee. The sha'bi mahragan and hip-hop genres mentioned several times in this review of the literature are outside the scope of this study. That said, it is my hope that this examination of Essam's and Cairokee's career trajectories will provide an adequate basis from which future comparisons of other genres of Egyptian protest music and their musical trajectories can be examined.

### Methodology

With the background of our subject artists and the academic reaction to them established, the methodology by which this study will expand upon these foundations can be outlined. As was stated in the literature review, this study will be using a multi-modal, close reading, comparative analysis to examine the lyrical and visual text of the artists' music videos throughout their career. To do this, each artist's texts will be examined side by side in three chronologic sections. The first section will deal with music videos produced and released during the initial anti-Mubarak protests and continue past his resignation on February 11<sup>th</sup> through its immediate aftermath and ending on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011. Though relatively few texts in this study are from this timeframe, this short period saw the release of the music videos that would cement both Cairokee and Ramy

Essam as cultural icons of the protests and is thus a critical period to examine. The second section will deal with music videos produced and released from March 1st, 2011 until current president Sisi's consolidation of power in June 2014. This period also encompasses the tumultuous SCAF and Morsi sections of the revolution and is of great importance to this study as it is where Cairokee and Ramy Essam subsequently developed their music and identities as cultural/political spokespeople in Egypt's volatile political reformation. The third and final section will deal with all music videos produced and released after June 2014 until the present. This period is vital for the conclusions of this study as it allows for the long-term trajectories of the subject artists' texts to be examined in a post-Tahrir Egypt and it is here where the thematic divergences between the two artists' texts will be fully realized.

On the subject of translation and transliteration, this study utilizes the following guidelines. Firstly, the English translations found within this study are a product of original translations from the Arabic lyrics provided by myself and synthesized with the English translations provided on many of the music videos. This was done so as to provide for accurate translations that capture all the nuances and phrasing of the local Egyptian dialect that most of these songs are sung in while also being informed of how the artists and their producers intended their songs to be understood by an English-speaking audience. By doing this, the study is able to capture both the cultural allusions that are omitted in the original English translations while still having their themes be easily understood by English speakers. Wherever songs did not have English translations available,

those translations were provided entirely by myself and are noted as such. Secondly, the transliterations of Arabic words found in this study follow a similar pattern. Song titles here are transliterated as they are transliterated in their published forms. This leads to inconsistencies in how certain words are transliterated between different artists, producers, and time periods, but it is done so to preserve how these texts were originally published, especially when considering the unique pronunciations of the local Egyptian dialect. Where song titles or other words appear that do not have an original published transliterated form, these will be transliterated using the IJMES Arabic transliteration system.

### The Day of Rage-Mubarak's Resignation

While the start of the Tahrir Square protests has already been discussed to some extent in this study, it may be beneficial to further set the context in which the music videos from this section are being made in. As was stated before, the center of Egyptian revolution found its home in Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo, where protestors erected barricades, makeshift hospitals, and stages for music and speeches.<sup>47</sup> State security forces and hired thugs immediately attempted to put a stop to the protests, the most infamous action of this timeframe being the so called "Battle of the Camel" where protestors were attacked by pro-Mubarak assailants on horse and camel-back.<sup>48</sup> These efforts were unsuccessful though as even some of the regular army soldiers sent out to

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<sup>47</sup> Amani Massoud, "A Brief History of Field Hospitals in Tahrir Square," Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Nov. 27, 2011, <https://eipr.org/en/blog/amani-massoud/2011/11/brief-history-field-hospitals-tahrir-square>; Zvi Bar'el, "Tahrir Square, From Place to Space," *Middle East Journal* 71, No. 1 (Winter 2017): 11.

<sup>48</sup> M. Cherif Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 30-31.

quell the protests ended up protecting/encouraging the protestors.<sup>49</sup> In combination with the steadfastness of the protestors in the streets, the growing pressure from across civil society, and concern within the inner ranks of the government, Mubarak would step down on February 11<sup>th</sup>.<sup>50</sup>

It is within this context that we arrive at Cairokee's first hit protest song, "Sout al-Horeya" (The Voice of Freedom). The video for it was filmed at Tahrir Square among the protestors with singer Amir Eid and producer/singer of fellow Egyptian rock band Wust Al-Balad, Hany Adel, mingling among them.<sup>51</sup> The video is shot in a simple handheld format akin to a cellphone camera as the two protagonists move about the square.<sup>52</sup> The song's chorus portrays the protest movement as the proverbial "voice of freedom":

"In every street in my country  
The voice of freedom is calling."<sup>53</sup>

This voice of freedom is visually communicated to the audience by having the crowd interact with the lyrics of the song, holding up pieces of cardboard with the lyrics scribbled on them and mouthing the lyrics as they are heard on screen.<sup>54</sup> Although these signs were given to the crowds by the producers, they are written on different materials and written in various styles, which imparts a feeling that these signs, and thus the lyrics of the song, are a genuine representation of the

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<sup>49</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egyptians Defiant as Military Does Little to Quash Protests," *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, Jan. 29, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/30/world/middleeast/30-egypt.html>.

<sup>50</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution and its Aftermath*, 45.

<sup>51</sup> Amir Eid, "Sout Al Horeya صوت الحريه Amir Eid - Hany Adel - Hawary On Guitar & Sherif On Keyboards," Feb. 11, 2011, 00:13, 01:07, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw\\_zfLLvh8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fgw_zfLLvh8).

<sup>52</sup> Amir Eid, "Sout Al Horeya," 00:01.

<sup>53</sup> Amir Eid, "Sout Al Horeya," 00:50; Combined translation.

<sup>54</sup> Amir Eid, "Sout Al Horeya," 00:18.

popular opinion of the protestors.<sup>55</sup> This occurs amidst seas of Egyptian flags and graffiti pieces exclaiming how “The street is ours,” portraying the protests as a popular reclamation of the nation where Egyptian identity and the concept of freedom are intertwined.<sup>56</sup> Thus, not only does the video use its visual component to capture a popular and nationalist vision of the protests, it uses its visuals to credit itself as an authentic representation of the mood of the nation as its message is acted out by the crowds in the video.

Lyricaly, that mood is one of triumph and sacrifice:

“I went out to the street, vowing not to return  
And I wrote with my blood on every street  
Those who do not listen heard us  
And we broke through all barriers  
Our weapons were our dreams  
And tomorrow is looking bright.”<sup>57</sup>

Despite the sacrificial feeling to these lyrics, the upbeat manner in which they are delivered softens their clash with the song’s calm rhythm and soothing tone, imparting a “calm after the storm” sort of feel. Indeed, bandaged and wounded, but smiling, protestors show up throughout the video, their joy in solidarity overpowering the pain of the violence inflicted upon them.<sup>58</sup> This communicates that the voice of freedom as embodied in the protestors has nearly prevailed over

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<sup>55</sup> Valassopoulos, “Popular Protest Music and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution,” 643.

<sup>56</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya,” 01:59, 00:37.

<sup>57</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya,” 00:17-00:41; Combined translation.

<sup>58</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya,” 01:45, 2:33.

the forces who would try to stop it and freedom itself is inevitable. Its toll has been paid and the viewer is made to believe that the worst is behind them.

This “voice of freedom” is also a diverse one. The protestors who make up this communal voice are Egyptians from all walks of life: young and old, Copts and Muslims, civilians and soldiers all cooperating in a natural harmony.<sup>59</sup> While civilian/military solidarity would prove a short-lived feature of this initial period of the protests, the video presents the revolution as enjoying a broad base of support in Egyptian society and as a paradigm shift in how the country will carry itself into the future with the lyrics echoing this sentiment:

“The most important thing is our right  
And we write our history with our blood  
If you were one of us don’t blather to us  
To leave and abandon our dream  
And stop saying the word “I.”<sup>60</sup>

The broad variety of Egyptian people shown, the references to sacrifice, and the appeals for the abandonment of selfishness reinforce the nationalistic and communal elements seen before. In addition to their Egyptian identity, the crowds are also unified by their use of technology. Cellphone cameras are seen in the hands of the crowd in a way that highlights its diversity, in the hands of Adel, a man with a Coptic cross tattoo on his hand, and the many more people with no identifying marks.<sup>61</sup> This presence of cellphones refers back to the video’s filming style and conveys a sense of unity among not only the crowd, but

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<sup>59</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya,” 02:23, 02:32, 02:40, 02:46.

<sup>60</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya,” 01:32-01:57; Combined translation.

<sup>61</sup> Amir Eid, “Sout Al Horeya,” 01:23, 02:13, 03:29.

with the viewer as well as they become a vicarious participant in a technologically connected revolution. The revolution is also subsequently shown to be an inevitability, a sign of the times, by the framing of this new technology as on the side of the protestors.

Before its final refrain, the song incorporates a reading of Egyptian poet Abdelrahman al-Abnudi's poem "The Square" into the lyrics:

"Dark Egyptian hands, against discrimination  
Reach out through the roar to destroy the frames  
The creative youth came out and turned autumn into spring  
They have performed the miracle and raised the murdered from murder  
Kill me, killing me will not bring back your country  
In my blood I shall write a new life for my nation  
My blood or is it the spring? Both green in color  
Am I smiling because of my happiness or my sorrows?"<sup>62</sup>

This poem presents a fitting recapitulation of the song's themes by using al-Abnudi as an authority. The older poet acknowledges the sacrifices of the revolution and acknowledges the role of the youth as progenitors for this new Egypt. It hands the future off to them as it is inevitable that the young will always supersede the old just as the poem says autumn turns to spring. And perhaps most interestingly, the poem reinforces the permanence of the revolution, asserting that not even killing the protestors can bring the old system back.

All told, themes of popular unity, sacrifice, and technology give the video an almost euphoric feeling that plays to a liberal sense of politics as a steady

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<sup>62</sup> Amir Eid, "Sout Al Horeya," 02:41-02:47; Combined translation.

upward progression of society, in this case the inevitability of a peaceful outcome for a democratic, post-Mubarak Egypt. Additionally, the fact that the video was released on February 10, a day before Mubarak's resignation, is prescient.<sup>63</sup> It is almost as if the video predicted the impending fall of Mubarak, that it had some sort of unique insight on what the outcome of the protests would be. In fact, Wael Ghonim, admin of the "We are All Khalid Said" Facebook page and important player in the early stage of the protests, recommended it as the "best song to come out of the revolution."<sup>64</sup> This coincidence undoubtedly contributed to the song's appeal and its viral spread would further enhance its visual-textual motifs of peaceful people power as well as the credibility of Cairokee's texts as reliable reflections of Egypt's current politics. But as time passed, the euphoric outlook of "Sout al-Horeya" with its hopefulness, appreciation for early support of the military, and faith in an inevitable turn towards freedom may have proved too good to have been true.

In comparison to Cairokee's breakout song, Ramy Essam's "Irhal" (Leave/Get Lost) uses a similar setting and themes to convey its anti-Mubarak message but is more visceral in tone regarding the reality of the protests and the nature of the actions being taken there. Whereas "Sout al-Horeya" was a professionally produced music video, the most popular viral video of Essam performing "Irhal" is a roughly edited live performance of Essam performing in

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<sup>63</sup> Amir Eid, "Sout Al Horeya," Youtube, Google, Feb. 10, 2011.

<sup>64</sup> "VIDEO: Egypt Seed's 'Voice of Freedom' protest video from Tahrir Square goes viral," Seeds of Peace, Seeds of Peace, Feb. 12, 2011, <https://www.seedsofpeace.org/egyptian-seeds-voice-of-freedom-video-from-tahrir-square-goes-viral/>.

Tahrir Square uploaded by a third party.<sup>65</sup> Everything that appears in the video is recorded spontaneously as it occurred at the protest. Textually, “Irhal” is a simple improvised song where the lyrics are the same as many of the chants used by the protestors to express their distaste for Hosni Mubarak while Essam strums his guitar.

The opening scene shows the protestors at Tahrir Square holding signs, cellphones, and Egyptian flags just as the Cairokee video did, but filmed at night instead of the daytime.<sup>66</sup> Additionally, effigies are hung, and shoes are held up by many people in the crowd, a symbol of disrespect throughout the Arab world, in this case directed at Mubarak.<sup>67</sup> On top of a platform with someone holding a microphone up to him, Essam begins to sing:

“We all, united,  
Want one thing,  
Get lost! Get lost!  
Fall, Fall Hosni Mubarak!”<sup>68</sup>

The song promotes themes of unity just as “Sout al-Horeya” did but is more concerned with the removal of President Hosni Mubarak from office and expressing anger towards him. The video also shows the aggressive side of the protests. It does not turn the lens away from the effigies in the square and actively insults the president through song and the holding up of shoes. This

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<sup>65</sup> Itai Anghel, “The real revolution song of Tahrir square,” Feb. 25, 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Itai Anghel, “Ramy Essam - The real revolution song of Tahrir square,” Feb. 25, 2011, 00:07, 00:32, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-rEKmTBKiBM>.

<sup>67</sup> Itai Anghel, “The real revolution song of Tahrir square,” 00:01, 00:46; Hamid Dabashi, “The Arabs and their Flying Shoes,” al-Jazeera, al-Jazeera Media Network, Feb.26, 2013, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2013/2/26/the-arabs-and-their-flying-shoes>.

<sup>68</sup> Itai Anghel, “The real revolution song of Tahrir square,” 00:10-00:38; Translation mine.

visceral feel of the lyrical and visual text is matched by its sonic and visual presentation. Cairokee's "Sout Al-Horeya" video has a crisp recording studio sound and filmed in HD on a sunny day where even the blood of injured protesters looks clean. By contrast, "Irhal's" grimy 240p format, its nighttime locale, and the sound of Essam's voice and guitar distorted by the improvised sound equipment make the environment feel much more chaotic.

The second verse begins with the chant that the world was coming to know as the catchphrase of the Arab Spring.<sup>69</sup>

"The people want the fall of the regime!  
He is leaving, we will not leave."<sup>70</sup>

Throughout these chants the audience is heard actively singing along with Essam, a striking example of spontaneous crowd interaction with the text rather than Cairokee's staged version of it. And while Cairokee and their production team had control over the visual text of their music video, Essam did not. This is in addition to the fact that judging by the records and context clues that are available, Cairokee and Ramy Essam filmed each of their videos at roughly the same time in the protests, saw the same events unfold, and then went on to produce two separate interpretations of the events. The spontaneity of "Irhal" and the enthusiastic crowd participation make the video's presentation of the protests feel decidedly more organic than Cairokee's and gives the impression that Essam captures a more realistic picture of what is going on at the protests. When

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<sup>69</sup> "The Rhythm of Revolution: Protest Chants from Egypt to Ecuador," CSIS, Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 17, 2011, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/rhythm-revolution-protest-chants-egypt-ecuador>.

<sup>70</sup> Itai Anghel, "The real revolution song of Tahrir square," 00:53-01:30; Translation mine.

that realism involves the implications of violence and displays of anger found in the video, it becomes clear that the revolutionary process occurring in Tahrir Square is much more an ongoing violent struggle than it is Cairokee's impending victory where the framing of violence is minimized. Indeed, the music video is interspliced with interview footage of Essam and it picks up the next day to show that Essam is now bandaged and bloodied after an encounter with the police.<sup>71</sup> Whereas the conclusion of "Sout al-Horeya" seemed to herald the end of oppression and mark the beginning of peace and freedom, the conclusion of "Irhal" shows that violence and oppression are still very much a factor in the protests. This differing portrayal of the Square shows a more practical outlook that sees the protests as one step in a continuing struggle that is far from over.

One element of Essam's performance in "Irhal" that deserves further attention is the use of repetitive political slogans that double as easily chanted lyrics. I mentioned before that "The people want the fall of the regime" was the emerging slogan of the Arab Spring and in fact the incorporation of this vocabulary into Essam's lyrics draws unique parallels to the musical techniques of past Egyptian protest musicians. Simple songs in the local Egyptian dialect were a fixture of Egyptian revolutions of the past, especially the 1919 Revolution against the British.<sup>72</sup> The usage of similar songwriting conventions in "Irhal" demonstrates a textual awareness of this history in its utilization of these tactics. Essam would also often perform the exact same songs written by the popular

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<sup>71</sup> Itai Anghel, "The real revolution song of Tahrir square," 03:40.

<sup>72</sup> "Songs for Tahrir," Jan. 18, 2012, in BBC Sounds, produced by BBC, 03:11, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b019fxjf>.

musicians of 1919, specifically Sayed Darwish's "Ahu Dalli Sar."<sup>73</sup> The reproduction of tactics and songs from Egypt's political/musical past establishes Essam as an artist with a decided "folk" appeal as it demonstrates an awareness of approaches that were proven motivators of popular action in previous revolutions. This awareness subsequently characterizes Essam's text as having its own unique way of reflecting the reality of Egyptian politics vis-à-vis Cairokee's more contemporary, liberal reflection of the situation. This reflection draws its rhetorical authority from a more historical and street level understanding of the revolution as opposed to Cairokee, whose interpretation of the state of the revolution draws from a positive, big picture outlook typified in the viral success of "Sout al-Horeya."

At this point, Ramy Essam and Cairokee's texts illustrate two different ways of interpreting the revolution. These different approaches are not necessarily in conflict with one another however, as they both support the fall of the Mubarak government and greater rights/freedom for the average Egyptian. Their main divergence point is the methods they use to portray and contribute to the revolution. "Sout al-Horeya" identifies an optimistic and idealistic approach while "Irhal" seems to prefer a more practical outlook that prefers direct action. As the revolution continues on, however, these two outlooks will be tested by the subsequent events of Tahrir's aftermath and end up either challenging or supporting the assertions of these texts.

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<sup>73</sup> Swedenburg, "Egypt's Music of Protest," 41.

## March 2011-The Sisi Presidency

Following Hosni Mubarak's resignation of the presidency, interim power was handed over to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces or SCAF, headed by field marshal Mohammed Hussein Tantawi.<sup>74</sup> This body was to oversee the running of the country until a new government could be democratically elected through both parliamentary and presidential elections.<sup>75</sup> Egypt's first free presidential election in decades in June 2012 would see the Muslim Brotherhood candidate of Mohammed Morsi take the election.<sup>76</sup> Morsi's tenure as presidency would be tumultuous as it grappled with uncooperative remnants of the previous government and with accusations that it was committing many of the same abuses Mubarak's government had.<sup>77</sup> The Morsi government would come to an end in July 2013 when the military launched a coup against him.<sup>78</sup> This was a highly controversial move and mass street protests erupted again to oppose it, culminating in the bloody Rabaa Square massacre in August 2013.<sup>79</sup> The then commander in chief of Egypt's armed forces, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, would resign his post and take power after an election with little real opposition in June 2014.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 44.

<sup>75</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 57-60.

<sup>76</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 103.

<sup>77</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 125; Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media*, 126.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 139.

<sup>80</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 143-144; David Kirkpatrick, "International Observers Find that Egypt's Presidential Election Fell Short of Standards," *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, May 29, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/30/world/middleeast/international-observers-find-fault-with-egypt-vote.html>.

Returning to the immediate aftermath of Mubarak’s resignation, and several months after the release of “Irhal,” Ramy Essam released his first professional music video “‘Aish, Huriyya” (Bread, Freedom) in September 2011.<sup>81</sup> Like “Irhal,” this song also borrows its title from one of the many popular chants heard at the Tahrir Square protests and in it Essam builds upon the calls for “bread, freedom, and social justice.”<sup>82</sup> This is Essam’s first release in which the music video is not impromptu and Essam takes advantage of this by having the video open up with a text crawl. It reads:

“Dedication. With all my respect and appreciation for all who contributed to spreading this message. I dedicate this work to the people of Egypt as a sincere gift. One people, one nation.”<sup>83</sup>

The frame transitions to another card in between shots of Essam walking down the street holding a guitar case.<sup>84</sup> It bears the title of the song and an Egyptian flag.<sup>85</sup> Another introduces him as “Ramy Essam: Voice of Egypt.”<sup>86</sup> This is accompanied by indistinct droning vocals and a strumming guitar until Essam starts to sing at full volume:

“Bread, freedom, social justice!  
Bread in Egypt means life

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<sup>81</sup> Ramy Essam, “عيش حرية عدالة اجتماعية - رامى عصام / Ramy Essam - Bread Freedom,” Youtube, Google, Sep. 26, 2011, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9Re4zJkoQM&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9Re4zJkoQM&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>82</sup> Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media*, 114.

<sup>83</sup> Ramy Essam, “عيش حرية عدالة اجتماعية - رامى عصام / Ramy Essam - Bread Freedom,” Sep. 26, 2011, 00:01-00:10, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9Re4zJkoQM&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9Re4zJkoQM&ab_channel=RamyEssam); Translation mine.

<sup>84</sup> Ramy Essam, “Bread Freedom,” 00:11.

<sup>85</sup> Ramy Essam, “Bread Freedom,” 00:17.

<sup>86</sup> Ramy Essam, “Bread Freedom,” 00:22.

Egypt has lived as a civilization for years and years  
And if the Nile runs dry, Egyptians will fill it with their sweat  
Bread in Egypt means life  
Egypt has lived as a civilization for years and years  
And if the Nile runs dry, tomorrow it will overflow, repaying the debt  
Bread, freedom, social justice!  
Loaf of bread for the kind people, for the peasant and for the worker oh  
father  
Loaf of bread, not conscription, any rights come after that  
Loaf of bread for the kind people, for the peasant and for the worker oh  
father  
Loaf of bread, not conscription, we will take it even if it's not polite  
Bread, freedom, social justice!  
When you say the word "Freedom!" You need to raise your hand high  
Freedom is the blessed loaf, any rights come after that  
When you say the word "Freedom!" You need to raise your hand high  
Freedom is the blessed loaf, we will take it even if it's not polite."<sup>87</sup>

Throughout the video's runtime, Essam walks confidently across the Qasr al-Nil Bridge, where numerous protests occurred a few months before, and rests against the bridge's railing to look out upon the Nile.<sup>88</sup> These shots are interrupted by cutaways to shots of local Egyptians and Essam lip-synching the lyrics to the song while footage of the protests and words from the lyrics are superimposed on the background.<sup>89</sup> This group of Egyptians is not as diverse as those in Cairokee's "Sout al-Horeya" however. Save for a middle-aged man, most appear to be in their twenties, they are all conventionally attractive, and

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<sup>87</sup> Ramy Essam, "Bread Freedom," 00:24-02:41; Combined translation.

<sup>88</sup> Ramy Essam, "Bread Freedom," 00:27, 00:40; Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 103.

<sup>89</sup> Ramy Essam, "Bread Freedom," 00:46-00:58.

none of the women wear hijabs.<sup>90</sup> The middle-aged man wears a Che Guevara t-shirt and one of the young men wears a Bart Simpson one.<sup>91</sup> The video ends as Essam finishes crossing the bridge, and cuts to a blooper reel of the guests recording their lip-synching.<sup>92</sup>

The contrasts between “‘Aish, Huriyya” and the preceding “Irhal” are immediate and striking. All of the grime, conflict, and danger of the previous video has suddenly vanished, and has been replaced by warm colors, crisp camera quality, and attractive faces. It becomes clear rather quickly that these changes along with core elements of the video itself such as guests lip-synching the lyrics and the inclusion of the word “freedom” in the song’s title, that “‘Aish, Huriyya” is directly imitating Cairokee’s “Sout al-Horeya.” Although on the surface it appears to have copied Cairokee’s formula down to a T with its comfortable visuals and anthemic chorus, there are some spots where it seems the imitation was not copied to the same effect. While Essam does rely upon a range of local Egyptians to mouth his lyrics and thus impart a feeling that the song reflects the opinions of a wide range of people, the lack of actual variety among them undercuts the point, especially when he bills himself as “The Voice of Egypt.” Furthermore, this new uncanny similarity to Cairokee further undercuts its message for justice by displacing the distinct position Essam established in “Irhal” that advocated for a more cynical outlook and a focus on direct action. Adopting a contrasting, friendlier style for his first major professional release

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<sup>90</sup> Ramy Essam, “Bread Freedom,” 01:38.

<sup>91</sup> Ramy Essam, “Bread Freedom,” 01:36, 03:45.

<sup>92</sup> Ramy Essam, “Bread Freedom,” 03:09-03:40.

gives the impression that Essam himself does not know where he stands. However, it may also be possible that Essam himself is still looking for his signature as an artist, whereas Cairokee has been at it for much longer. When making the leap from street performer to music video star, it does not seem unreasonable that Essam might defer to a style that has already been successfully established while still developing his own themes.

Despite the surface level influence of “Sout al-Horeya,” Essam has several moments where he showcases his own unique style. Both Cairokee and Ramy Essam demonstrated basic nationalistic themes in their seminal hits, most often manifested in an abundance of Egyptian flags in the frame of the camera. Essam takes those themes a step further in this video. The flags return, but Essam builds upon them when he sings about the age of Egypt as a civilization while gazing out upon the Nile river, asserting that if it were ever to dry out, the Egyptian people would refill it with their sweat. This establishes both a sense of timelessness for Egypt and a willingness for Egyptians to sacrifice their effort and comfort to maintain Egypt’s lifegiving river along with this being phrased as repaying a “debt” to the natural feature that is integral to Egypt’s existence.<sup>93</sup> Essam digs deep into Egyptian history to impart an almost primordial spirit in these lyrics, a quality not present in “Sout al-Horeya” which partakes in nationalistic themes more superficially. Essam’s invocation of nationalism here, however, is distinct in the fact that it is constructed within the unique relationship

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<sup>93</sup> Jahmed, “Impact of the Nile River on Ancient Egypt,” Real Archeology, Vassar College, Apr. 9, 2017, <https://pages.vassar.edu/realarchaeology/2017/04/09/impact-of-the-nile-river-on-ancient-egypt/>.

the Egyptian people have with the natural features of their country. It is not compared against anyone else and no cultural norms, institutions, or figures are idolized to separate Egypt from an “other.” This nationalistic interpretation allows the song to mesh rather easily with the Essam’s second unique theme of the song: class.

Essam incorporates class themes into “‘Aish, Huriyya” most noticeably when asserts he that the loaves of bread in the song belong to “the peasant and the worker” specifically, placing these working-class groups as the focal point of the song and as the main recipients of the titular bread, freedom, and social justice. Additionally, the song’s title itself places the material needs of the working class above all others; bread being the most important, followed by freedom, and then by social justice. This is compounded by the line that asserts that “any rights come after” the acquisition of bread, in direct contrast to Cairokee’s “Sout al-Horeya” with its line “the most important thing is our right.” This contrast illustrates a classic dilemma in progressive politics where more working-class groups prioritize material gains while more middle class “bourgeois” groups prioritize ideology or abstract conceptions of rights.<sup>94</sup> This split just so happens to also be mirrored in the respective origins of the two artists, Ramy Essam from working-class Mansoura and Cairokee from a well-off Cairo suburb of Maadi.<sup>95</sup> If this contrast is further considered, Essam’s text also benefits from this class-conscious outlook by being able to state three concrete goals it wants to see

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<sup>94</sup> Shelton Stromquist, *Reinventing “The People:” The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 4; Lewis S. Feur, “Materialism, Idealism, and Science,” *Philosophy of Science* 15, No. 1 (Jan. 1948): 75.

<sup>95</sup> Carolyn Ramzy, “The Revolution Did Not Take Place,” 5.

achieved as opposed to Cairokee celebrating the highly immaterial “voice of freedom.” It is telling that even Essam’s last ranked goal, social justice, though immaterial, is still more defined and directly restorative than Cairokee’s concept of freedom and rights. This all together creates an air of class consciousness in the video that is able to exist in harmony with Essam’s bottom-up approach to nationalism and the two then fuse to appeal to a far wider range of Egyptians than just those seen in video.

“Aish, Huriyya” overall appears to be a moment of transition for Essam as he begins to channel his early success at Tahrir Square into an actual artistic career. The text blatantly copies Cairokee’s “Sout al-Horeya” at multiple points but at others Essam’s own style from “Irhal” starts to leak through. He directly challenges Cairokee’s approach to conceptualizing the goals of the revolution. Yet from this video it is not clear just how wedded Essam is to the themes present within it. He has yet to truly earn the title “Voice of Egypt” from the nationalist perspective and from the class perspective it is unclear if his dedication goes beyond the signaling epitomized in the middle-aged man’s ubiquitous but redundant Che Guevara shirt.<sup>96</sup> But as Essam completes his crossing of the Qasr al-Nil Bridge at the end of the video, the audience is left with the impression that not only is the revolution entering into its next stage, but so is Essam’s body of work as an artist.

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<sup>96</sup> Emma Hope Allwood, “How the Che Guevara T-Shirt Became a Global Phenomenon,” Dazed, Dazed Media, July 26, 2016, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/fashion/article/32208/1/how-the-che-guevara-t-shirt-became-a-global-phenomenon>.

This next stage would be revealed in the run-up to the first parliamentary elections of the SCAF era that followed Mubarak's resignation.<sup>97</sup> During this time, Cairokee followed their anthemic hit "Sout al-Horeya" with their second protest song "Ya el-Medan" (Oh, the Square) on November 29th, 2011 featuring Wust al-Balad member Aida el-Ayouby.<sup>98</sup> The video begins with a fade-in shot of a piece of paper in a recording studio with the lyrics to "Sout al-Horeya" written on it.<sup>99</sup> In a somber tone Amir Eid begins to sing:

"Oh, the Square  
Where have you been all this time?  
With you we sang and with you we labored  
We fought our fears and we prayed  
One hand, day and night  
And with you nothing is impossible  
The voice of freedom brings us together  
Finally, our lives have meaning  
There is no going back, our voices are heard  
And the dream is not forbidden anymore."<sup>100</sup>

Alongside these lyrics comes a parade of artifacts from the protests recontextualized within the setting of a home: tear gas grenades holding pens, a hung-up coat with bullet holes, an improvised "square security" vest, tear gas remedies, a megaphone, a charging cellphone, and a pair of broken glasses.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 85-91.

<sup>98</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Ya El Medan," Nov. 29, 2011.

<sup>99</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Cairokee ft Aida El Ayouby Ya El Medan كايروكي و عايدہ الايوي," Nov. 29, 2011, 00:14, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=umlJJFVgYVI&ab&ab>.

<sup>100</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Ya el-Medan," 00:09-00:51; Combined translation.

<sup>101</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Ya el-Medan," 00:17, 00:22, 00:26, 00:30, 00:35, 00:40, 00:46.

This first verse recaps the success of their previous song. It demonstrates this connection with direct visual and lyrical references to “Sout al-Horeya,” its lyrical reference even being paired up with an image of a megaphone.<sup>102</sup> It then lyrically recaps the themes of “Sout al-Horeya” by commemorating the sacrifices, unity, and successes of the protestors. The montage that accompanies this recap deepens this message as spent grenades are recontextualized domestically, imparting a feeling of perseverance of peaceful protest over violent coercion. These objects were at first meant to stop the protestors but are now being used as useful objects in their own home. The jacket, pock-marked with holes from birdshot yet hung up, implies that its wearer returned home alive, and that the violence evidenced on the garment failed to stop them. The safety vest emblazoned with a security logo demonstrates that the protest movement has moved beyond the need for the existing state to police them as they set up their own institutions that represent themselves. This is deepened by the cellphone which shows a notification reading “مطلوب ادوات طبية في الميدان” or, “Requested: medical supplies at the Square.”<sup>103</sup> The protestors have again shown to have circumvented the state by establishing their own medical services and use cellphones as a sort of digital infrastructure to support their newfound self-governance. The sum effect of this montage is that it shows how the struggle on the street leaves its marks in the home as objects of oppression are domesticized. It consequently also shows how typically domestic objects are repurposed to provide an alternative to the state in a way that shows alternatives

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<sup>102</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 00:35.

<sup>103</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 00:40.

to governance that are more civil and democratic because they originate from the domestic sphere of the home. As a whole, the lyrical and visual text of this first verse deepens the impact of the former “Sout al-Horeya,” repeating its themes in addition to demonstrating how the protestors overcame Mubarak. But in its somber tone there is a hint that this success is not all that it appears, as following verses illustrate.

The second verse begins with Aida el-Ayouby sitting in a chair and playing the oud; she begins singing in a morose tone:<sup>104</sup>

“Oh, the Square  
Where have you been all this time?  
You brought down the wall, you lit the light  
You gathered a broken people  
We were born again  
And a persistent dream has been born  
We’ve disagreed with good intentions  
Sometimes the picture was not clear  
We’ll protect our country and our children’s children  
We’ll protect the rights of the youth’s lost lives.”<sup>105</sup>

This verse includes a similar parade of artifacts: protest signs with the brushes and paints to make them, a tray of pumpkin seeds and beans sitting in front of a blurry TV screen, and a crumpled doctor’s coat stained with blood.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 00:53.

<sup>105</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 00:53-01:35; Combined translation.

<sup>106</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 01:18, 01:22, 01:31.

Instead of the transformative imagery from the previous verse, the artifacts from this section of the video have a more foreboding quality. While the image of these Egyptian snacks and a TV would not carry any negative perceptions on its own, its coinciding with the lyric “sometimes the picture was not clear” complicates the image.<sup>107</sup> As was noted before, the TV screen itself is obscured in this image and the nature of what is being shown on it is unclear. The fact that the screen they watch is blurry hints at the fact that most Egyptians at the time consumed the news through their televisions which were dominated by heavily censored state-run news channels as opposed to consuming newer social media.<sup>108</sup> This establishes that there is a section of the population that Cairokee’s message will not reach or not be able to convince because of censorship and propaganda. The combination of popular snack foods and the TV also evokes an image of passivity and Cairokee’s second demographic stumbling block. Indeed, the image is strongly evocative of the so call “Hizb al-Kanaba” or “couch party,” a term used to describe those who may have supported the revolution in principle, but more often than not stayed home during the key protests and treated the situation almost more like a sporting event.<sup>109</sup> This imagery demonstrates a divide between these two sections of the Egyptian population and those protesting out on the street, a demographic that has been shown to identify more

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<sup>107</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 01:23; Ameirah, “Eating Seeds as a Pastime Activity: Pumpkin Seeds,” *The Serious Eater*, *The Serious Eater*, Nov. 25, 2011, <http://www.theseriouseater.com/2011/11/eating-seeds-as-pastime-activity.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Maryam Bin Fahad, “Arab Media Outlook 2011-2015, Arab Media: Exposure and Transition,” *Dubai Press Club*, No. 4 (2012): 137, 141-142; Ralph D. Berenger, *Social Media Go to War: Rage, Rebellion and Revolution in the Age of Twitter* (Spokane: Marquette Books LLC, 2013), 446-447.

<sup>109</sup> Carolyn Ramzy, “The Revolution Did Not Take Place,” 7-8.

with the cellphone than with the TV as their technology of choice and who are willing to participate in political actions directly. The indecisiveness displayed by these two groups could be chalked up to a number of factors, whether it be conditioning from decades of heavy-handed government rule or exclusionary class politics that keep different class groups from truly comingling with each other.<sup>110</sup> But in total, it becomes clear from this passage that not only do the protests have to overcome the Egyptian state itself, but a society that has been molded by it for decades.

The bloodied doctor's lab coat that has been tossed to the side offers a similar tonal shift. It corresponds with the lyric "we will protect the rights of our youths' lost lives."<sup>111</sup> Whereas harm experienced by the protestors in Cairokee's first video was showcased by smiling or defiant protesters in bandages, this video visually acknowledges the loss of life on their side. This coat specifically contrasts with the coat from earlier in the video which implied survival, here the blood and lyrics imply that the patient and perhaps even the doctor have died. The words "Square Hospital, Doctor 'Azam" scribbled on it in pen highlight how quickly the protestors set up their parallel institutions, but the coat's presentation also shows how they can be disrupted by state force.<sup>112</sup> Their existence as an alternative to the state does not in itself ensure that they will prevail over it. In spite of these challenging images, the lyrics to this verse remain positive overall, emphasizing the impact, unity, and future potential of the movement. It would be

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Ya el-Medan," 01:32.

<sup>112</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Ya el-Medan," 01:34.

dishonest of Cairokee to repeat the first verse's recap of successes for the whole song. This verse serves to acknowledge the losses the protesters have suffered and the distance they still have to go to achieve their goal.

The next verse, barring a newspaper clipping about the protests and some shotgun shells repurposed as parts of keychain, focuses mainly on Cairokee and Aida with the following lyrics rounding out the message of the previous two verses:<sup>113</sup>

“With you we felt and began anew  
After we strayed and had ended  
With our hands, we have to change ourselves  
You gave us a lot and the rest is up to us  
Sometimes I am afraid that you will become a memory  
We stray from you and the idea dies  
And we return again, forgetting what happened  
And speak of you only in stories.”<sup>114</sup>

The first two lines of this verse highlight the miraculous nature of the original protest in toppling a thirty-year dictator, echoing “Sout al-Horeya” and the song’s first verse while the next two lines emphasize the effort needed to fully realize their goals as in the second verse. It is in the last four lines where the sum of these two ideas finally comes into alignment with the song’s forlorn tone: the fear that all that has been gained will be lost. Even when acknowledging challenges to the movement, previous verses did not bring up the possibility of failure. However, the fact that so much of the song up until this point affirmed the

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<sup>113</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 02:02, 02:06, 01:37.

<sup>114</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Ya el-Medan,” 01:37-02:20; Combined translation.

achievements of the protests imparts a feeling that this is not a lament, but a warning reminding people of what is at stake. Eid and al-Ayoubi's forlorn tone adds further gravity to these encouragements and precautions. Clearly, the situation at the end of this video is not what it was at the end of "Sout al-Horeya" where the protests movement seemed moments away from success. "Ya al-Medan" as a whole is an acknowledgment of a far more complicated reality.

About two months later on January 24th, 2012 after the conclusion of the first round of parliamentary elections, Cairokee released their next high profile protest song "Ethbat Makanak" (Hold Your Ground) featuring Egyptian rapper ZAP Tharwat.<sup>115</sup> The video begins with Cairokee in a recording studio. Amir Eid dons a pair of headphones and begins to sing:

"Hold your ground, here is your address, the fear fears you and your conscience never betrayed you

Hold your ground, the sun light is returning, you die and stand, or you live and kneel

Hold your ground, your eyes see the evidence that is hidden from you, guard against them

Hold your ground, the heart of the nation hurts and the voice of freedom has stopped sounding

Your speech is incomprehensible, your feeling is indescribable

You say dignity and they respond with insults, you say justice and they say you're a traitor."<sup>116</sup>

At first, when Amir Eid commands the audience in his impassioned voice to "hold their ground," it gives off an impression of empowerment, that they are close to

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<sup>115</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Ethbat Makanak," Jan. 24, 2012; "Egypt's Islamist Parties Win Elections to Parliament," BBC, BBC, Jan. 21, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-16665748>.

<sup>116</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairokee - Ethbat Makanak اثبت مكانك - كايروكي," Jan. 24, 2012, 00:26-01:35, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rYoCS7i0Slg&ab>; Combined translation.

victory and should not back down. However, when “Sout el-Horeya” is lyrically referenced, it is that the titular “voice of freedom” has gone silent, echoing a fear present in the previous release “Ya el-Medan”. This then hints that the message of the song is not so much to directly empower the audience as it is to rally them in the face of some sudden setback. Indeed, almost a year has passed since the start of the protests and amidst escalating political violence directed at the protestors and concerning election results, the audience may need some sort of reassurance.<sup>117</sup> This rallying cry posits that their cause is righteous, that they are the ones who are feared, that they should stick to what they know to be true, and that those who oppose them are unreasonable or literally cannot understand them. However, these lyrics seem to describe a paradoxical tone of both strength and vulnerability in their appeal to stand fast. They lend the video a contradictory tone that will persist throughout its runtime.

Interspliced with the band performing are images of a collage being constructed, showcasing pictures of the protests. Obscured figures in suits are briefly shown rushing somewhere.<sup>118</sup> The second verse begins:

“Hold your ground, here is your address, the fear fears you and your  
conscience never betrayed you

Hold your ground, you're the light of dawn and the sound of your cheer is  
louder than the sound of bullets and treachery

Hold your ground, with the Adhan ask God whose name is rights, justice,  
and peace

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<sup>117</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick and Liam Stack, “Violent Protests in Egypt Pit Thousands Against Police,” *The New York Times*, The New York Times Company, Nov. 19, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/20/world/middleeast/violence-erupts-in-cairo-as-egypts-military-cedes-political-ground.html>; Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 102.

<sup>118</sup> BassemYoussefShow, “Cairokee - Ethbat Makanak,” 00:49, 01:50.

Hold your ground, your shoulder touches your brother's, even if it leaves, the idea will not die.”<sup>119</sup>

This verse repeats the themes of the first, but now the people in the collage start to become clear. A picture is shown of Emad Effat, a cleric killed in the protests, along with one of journalist Belal Fadl.<sup>120</sup> Members of the Salafyo Costa religious activist group make appearances as themselves.<sup>121</sup> Belal Fadl himself also appears later in the video.<sup>122</sup> Fadl and Effat being presented in this way together at first seems to imply that they share the same fate, death. However, Fadl's surprise appearance towards the end of the video recontextualizes this to convey a sense that all those involved here are aware of their own mortality, of how easily they could become martyrs memorialized through pictures on a wall. But in this there is also an equalization: a Muslim cleric and secular journalist are both shown to be equally capable of embodying the spirit of the movement. This blending of cross-demographic unity with an embrace of mortality thus espouses righteousness in the face of violence, righteousness through a religious lens, and finally the persistence of ideas beyond the mortal lives of those who hold them. At the end of this verse's chorus, talk show host Bassem Youssef opens his eyes and dramatically smashes a television with a sledgehammer.<sup>123</sup> Aside from visually accentuating the lyrics, this cross-section of personalities also gives the

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<sup>119</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairooke - Ethbat Makanak," 01:56-02:35; Combined translation.

<sup>120</sup> H.A. Hellyer, "Powerful Scholars and Clerics of Power: Remembering Shaykh Emad Effat," *Jadaliyya*, Arab Studies Institute, Jan. 26, 2021, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/42298>; @belalfadl, "Belal Fadl," Twitter, Twitter Inc., Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://twitter.com/belalfadl?lang=en>.

<sup>121</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairooke - Ethbat Makanak," 02:21, 02:54, 02:29; Jayson Casper, "Salafyo Costa: Egyptian Inclusivity," Middle East Institute, Middle East Institute, Dec. 9, 2013, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/salafyo-costa-egyptian-inclusivity>.

<sup>122</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairooke - Ethbat Makanak," 04:14.

<sup>123</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairooke - Ethbat Makanak," 03:02.

impression that even in the protest movement's uncertain current state, they still maintain their broad coalition across Egyptian society. This is despite the fact that the original Tahrir Square movement was at that time being displaced by the development of the Muslim Brotherhood as Egypt's chief anti-regime party.<sup>124</sup>

The next verse begins with featured artist ZAP Tharwat rapping:

"You're supposed to be silent to be a body double  
You need to shut up, die, or live as a prisoner  
Living in the biggest prison but inside I am free  
The present will surprise, protect me from all evil  
Loyalty to the past, ideas friendly to us  
A lie of the liar inside of me assures the truth  
The reflection, fake history in the mirror is clear  
A rock breaks the mirror, the truth is revealed  
What's inside us is hidden even if our bodies are exposed  
Whoever utters the truth, of treason he is accused  
Defeat after defeat, but my victory was stolen  
The truth has been obscured with sadness upon a burned book  
I am those who died a year ago, those who fought were not hanged  
I am the lines on the paper, I am those who are burnt inside  
I am those whose hair went gray from the death of a kid at school  
I am the one who is constant no matter what they say or no matter how  
much they increase the sorrow".<sup>125</sup>

This verse along with ZAP's sober delivery contains some of the most impactful lines of the entire song. He cautions against settling for comfort and stability and connects the motivations of the protestors to traumas internalized since

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<sup>124</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 95-97.

<sup>125</sup> BasseemYoussefShow, "Cairokee - Ethbat Makanak," 03:25-04:05; Combined translation.

childhood which help highlight the generational aspect of the protest movement. Within the structure of the song, this verse also mimics the reading of al-Abnudi's poem in "Sout al-Horeya," where now a younger poet has taken his place to continue advocating for freedom in Egypt, just as al-Abnudi predicted. These lines evoke a rejection of the complacency they see among the Egyptian people after thirty years of knowing nothing but Mubarak's regime. Similarly, they evoke a rejection of defeatism that is starting to grow as the revolution encounters more and more roadblocks. Next, ZAP Tharwat refers to those lost to the policies that hold up that regime's supposed stability, something that many younger Egyptians witnessed firsthand while growing up. This also offers an allusion to one of the protests' main sparks, the death of youth Khaled Said at the hands of police.

Despite the beauty of this verse, the video's visual text takes a noticeable shift that distracts from its lyrical content. While ZAP is rapping, the obscured suited figures seen earlier in the video are revealed to be several independent satellite news personalities. Yosri Fouda, Dina Abdel Rahman, and Reem Maged pose confidently in front of their sets during Zap's verse. The final chorus begins as Bassem Youssef appears again with the sledgehammer. Credits roll over pictures from the collage.<sup>126</sup> All of these featured media personalities were employees of ONTV, an independent Egyptian satellite television station established in 2009 and staffed largely by people who left or were fired by other networks, for example Fouda at al-Jazeera and Abdelrahman at Dream TV 2.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairokee - Ethbat Makanak," 04:09, 04:18, 04:21, 04:26.

<sup>127</sup> Hend Kortam, "Yosri Fouda goes off air," Daily News Egypt, The Daily News Egypt, June 21, 2012, <https://www.dailynewssegypt.com/2012/06/21/yosri-fouda-goes-air/>; Zeinab El Gundy, "Famous Egyptian TV host sacked after challenging ex-army officer on air," Ahram Online, Ahram

Bassem Youssef was also a host on ONTV at the time of the music video's release.<sup>128</sup>

This shift of visual focus is almost jarring at first as Cairokee has never featured newscasters in their music videos before. Suddenly, these newscasters take up the majority of featured appearances. Their screen-time and the way they pose for the camera seem to amplify their importance to the video, despite the fact that they have little to do with ZAP's verse and his emotional reaction to the challenges the revolution is currently facing. In addition to being unexpected, the presentation of these figures in the video also contradicts Cairokee's previous videos. In "Sout al-Horeya" and "Ya el-Medan," individual protestors, their experiences, and contributions are usually the visual highlights when the camera is not focusing on the band. This is seen when protestors appear in person in "Sout al-Horeya" or with an examination of the artifacts of their lives in "Ya el-Medan." And while individual protestors are still featured in "Ethbat Makanak," they are overshadowed by the members of a single news organization. And while ONTV definitely had a much more progressive/independent bend than Egypt's ubiquitous state sponsored media or multinational conglomerates like al-Jazeera at the time, it is puzzling why a musical act that supposedly values personal expression as much as Cairokee would let them visually eclipse the other

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Online, July 25, 2011, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/17266/Egypt/Politics-/Famous-Egyptian-TV-host-sacked-after-challenging-e.aspx>.

<sup>128</sup> "Bassem Youssef," Stanford, Stanford University, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/people/bassem-youssef>.

subjects of their video.<sup>129</sup> The video itself is also hosted on Bassem Youssef's personal Youtube channel and thus the inclusion of these new patrons into a prominent place in the text raises questions about their influence over it.<sup>130</sup> This ultimately gives the impression that the video's message is at least partly coopted as a way to promote the role of ONTV's staff in the revolution, whether or not they played as large a role in it as the people on the street who were featured in the original "Sout al-Horeya" video.

Placing a satellite news station on such a pedestal leads to another textual inconsistency in Cairokee's visual canon as previously, Cairokee's revolutionary communication technology of choice had been the cellphone, it being highlighted in both of their previous music videos. Satellite news has not been mentioned before and the only time television was mentioned was in "Ya el-Medan" where it appears to be a source of confusion rather than clarity. Neither is the position of ONTV staff on the issue clear either, as Bassem Youssef smashes his main way of communicating with the Egyptian public with a hammer. The TV he smashes is one of an older style. This could possibly imply the smashing of the old state sponsored media in favor of their own stations or distribution on digital platforms. The TV that was negatively portrayed in Cairokee's last video was also of this style. However, many of these political music videos were also broadcast on television where they reached a larger local audience and were not reliant on the internet for their spread, highlighting the fact that the dissemination of these

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<sup>129</sup> Egypt Independent, "Protestors Accuse ONTV of Inciting Against the Military," Egypt Independent, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Feb. 23, 2012, <https://egyptindependent.com/protesters-accuse-ontv-inciting-against-military/>.

<sup>130</sup> BassemYoussefShow, "Cairokee - Ethbat Makanak," Jan. 24, 2012.

videos and their ideas was still heavily tied to television.<sup>131</sup> Even if this was the intended message, there is no clear explanation for why Cairokee would suddenly switch up their technological representation of the revolution for one that was absent from their texts before and for it to eclipse the verse of a featured artist that is the climax of the song.

Even if one were to take Cairokee's involvement with ONTV on "Ethbat Makanak" as an honest expression of how they saw their role in the revolution, it does not resolve the fact that the final result is an audio-visual text with multiple incoherent elements. Their lyrics, as impactful as they are, seem to be overstating the strength of the protest movement in the face of their setbacks, a point that cannot help but be partially admitted by other lyrics in the song itself. The song allows the involvement of ONTV members to eclipse its lyrical message and inject discontinuity into the visual message. None of this is helped by the fact that the portrayal of ONTV staff is incoherent as well, as typified in Bassem Youssef's TV smashing. "Ya el-Medan's" nuanced mixture of hope and concerned honesty on the state of the revolution is muddled in "Ethbat Makanak" with so many lyrical and visual themes battling for control of the song's narrative. Amongst all these competing elements a question needs to be asked: a year on into the revolution, why is Cairokee's third major song not a celebration of victory for the movement, but rather a plea to not retreat? The end result of this incoherence is an impression that at this moment, Cairokee no longer has their finger on the pulse of Egypt's politics like they did in February 2011. They know

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<sup>131</sup> Carolyn Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 2.

things are not turning out how they expected them to be, but they do not seem to know how to stop it, throwing in every possible appeal to rally the protest movement back to its initial perceived strength. Perhaps just as the original Tahrir movement was beginning to lose itself in the maelstrom of the post-Tahrir political crisis, so too was Cairo losing itself in Egypt's sea of competing social, political, and religious class interests.

The drastic change in the fortunes of the Tahrir revolution would also be reflected in Ramy Essam's music, as showcased in the music video for song "Ya Maglis Yabin Haram (UA07)" (Oh Parliament, Oh Bastard), released in April 2012.<sup>132</sup> The song is an upfront response to the Port Said stadium riot, where on February 1<sup>st</sup> 2012, Egyptian security forces both allowed and facilitated the murder of over seventy fans of the Egyptian al-Ahly soccer team by fans and hooligans/thugs supporting the rival al-Masry team.<sup>133</sup> It has been widely reported that Egyptian police prevented al-Ahly fans from escaping the soccer stadium while opening the gates that allowed rival fans and outside elements to reach and assault the al-Ahly fans.<sup>134</sup> It has also been alleged that a motivation for the massacre happening was the strong support the al-Ahly Ultras group gave to the revolution from Tahrir Square onwards and that the riot was orchestrated

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<sup>132</sup> Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam - UA07 | Official Music Video يا مجلس يابن الحرام - رامى عصام - يا مجلس يابن الحرام," Youtube, Google, Apr. 29, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjj61p3lO3Y&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjj61p3lO3Y&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>133</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Egyptian Soccer Riot Kills More Than 70," The New York Times, The New York Times Company, Feb. 2, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/02/world/middleeast/scores-killed-in-egyptian-soccer-mayhem.html>.

<sup>134</sup> Jamie Doward, "Egyptian police incited massacre at stadium, say angry footballers," The Guardian, Guardian News & Media Limited, Feb. 4, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/feb/05/egypt-football-massacre-police-arab-spring>.

by elements of the interim SCAF regime as retaliation.<sup>135</sup> Protests emerged across Egypt in response to this.<sup>136</sup> The video begins with Ramy Essam atop a stage in front of a huge chanting crowd at one these protests.<sup>137</sup> The chanting cuts out of the recording and Essam begins to sing:

“In Port Said victims saw tragedy before death  
They saw the best of the system and chaos throughout the country  
He thought it was judgement day, it would take him to the highest place  
And the revolutionaries kneeled with the military, that was the past  
Call off your dogs and the chaos everywhere as well  
My life won't give you security and don't judge me in the same day  
There were dogs in Port Said when the military opened the door  
Let loose while chaos reigned and killed our most precious youth  
Among them were the engineer, the worker, and sons  
They went forth and from them your judgement is nullified  
Oh parliament, oh bastard, you sold the blood of the martyrs for what?  
Its best for the system that you go as well.”<sup>138</sup>

As Essam performs, footage of protests and police crackdowns dominates the video's visual space. These shots are filled with Egyptian flags, flags of the al-Ahly football club and some from the Egyptian Revolutionary Socialists, along with protest signs condemning military trials.<sup>139</sup> Violent imagery makes a

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<sup>135</sup> Moham El Dahshan, “Egypt's tragedy: This is not just soccer violence,” Foreign Policy, The Slate Group, Feb. 2, 2012, [https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/02/egypts-tragedy-this-is-not-just-soccer-violence/#.TyqX1Y\\_AEp.facebook](https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/02/02/egypts-tragedy-this-is-not-just-soccer-violence/#.TyqX1Y_AEp.facebook).

<sup>136</sup> Dave Zirin, “How a Tragic Football Riot May Have Revived the Egyptian Revolution,” al-Jazeera, al-Jazeera Media Network, Feb. 16, 2012, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2012/2/16/how-a-tragic-football-riot-may-have-revived-the-egyptian-revolution>.

<sup>137</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam - UA07 | Official Music Video يا مجلس يابن الحرام - رامى عصام,” Apr. 29, 2012, 00:04, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjj61p3IO3Y&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjj61p3IO3Y&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>138</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 00:09-01:13; Translation mine.

<sup>139</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 00:05, 00:20, 00:23, 00:14.

pronounced return with scenes of the actual Port Said Stadium Riot, women crying over beaten and bloody protestors, bloodstains on the street, and shots of murals commemorating the fallen.<sup>140</sup> Other shots emphasize violent empowerment of the protestors by showing an enraged protestor screaming in front of a fire and another of a man holding a noose up to the camera.<sup>141</sup> The video ends with a shot of a banner reading: “We freed our country from the thief and the Ultras pay the price for freedom.”<sup>142</sup>

From the beginning of the video, it is immediately clear that Essam has dropped any pretense of copying the style found in Cairokee’s videos. While still a professionally edited video with overdubbed music and published on Essam’s own Youtube channel, all of its visuals come from footage recorded at protests as they happened. Much like the footage from “Irhal,” the footage here is grimy and without the crisp, glowing quality found in “‘Aish, Huriyya.” The violent imagery from “Irhal” returns and then some, with depictions of violence and its aftermath in both the visuals and the lyrics. Any doubts about Essam’s ability to have his music resonate with a broad audience due to how he presented himself in “‘Aish, Huriyya” are put to rest as the camera pans out to the huge crowd of people who have come to watch Essam perform, as they jump up and down to his music.<sup>143</sup> The crowd also appears just as diverse as the one seen in “Sout al-Horeya.” As the camera focuses on them, the overdubbed audio cuts out and reintroduces the actual recording from the performance where the crowd

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<sup>140</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 02:15, 01:15, 00:46, 00:09.

<sup>141</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 00:43, 01:59.

<sup>142</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 02:38.

<sup>143</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 01:06.

enthusiastically sings along with the chorus: “Oh parliament, oh bastard, you sold the blood of the martyrs for what?”<sup>144</sup> This reaffirms Essam’s credibility as a political performer who is able to connect with a street-level audience. It may not be all Egyptians or enough to affect an election, but the confidence and support demonstrated in this video by Essam places him in a contrasting light towards Cairokee who just a few months before were seen struggling to hold their message together. All told, the tragic events at Port Said seem to have brought Essam clarity as he performs this rousing condemnation of the Egyptian state.

Why the Port Said massacre seems to have prompted Essam to embrace this change sheds additional light on Essam as an artist. Essam developed a close relationship with the members of the al-Ahly Ultras during the initial Tahrir Square protests where both were prominent fixtures.<sup>145</sup> Seeing his allies attacked with such impunity undoubtedly had a strong impact on Essam and it is seen in the anger he displays here. The Ultras’ affinity for Essam is later seen reciprocated in the “Ultras Ramy Essam” Facebook page formed shortly before the release of this video where pictures from that performance are its first posts.<sup>146</sup> The working-class background of ultra soccer culture and its readiness to resort to direct action may also help explain Essam’s close relationship with the Ultras as those descriptors align with his persona.<sup>147</sup> In the context of the Port

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<sup>144</sup> Ramy Essam, “UA07,” 01:04-01:09.

<sup>145</sup> Mark LeVine, “Music and the Aura of Revolution,” 794.

<sup>146</sup> @Ultras.R.E, “Ultras Ramy Essam,” Facebook, Facebook, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/Ultras.R.E/photos/>.

<sup>147</sup> Jack Beville, “Football and Socialism: A Game of Two Halves,” World Football Index, World Football Index, June 1, 2020, <https://worldfootballindex.com/2020/06/football-and-socialism-left-wing-football-clubs-politics/>.

Said massacre, it seems that Essam abandoned his foray into Cairokee's media-friendly approach to musical activism to assist his friends in the way that truly reflects both of their values. Doing so also secures Essam a dedicated base of supporters, because while the al-Ahly Ultras and other groups who rallied to their defense like the Revolutionary Socialists may be on the margins of mainstream Egyptian society, they are committed to their respective causes.<sup>148</sup> It seems unlikely that with this support that Essam would ever find himself calling out for someone to heed his words as Cairokee does in "Ethbat Makanak." In abandoning Cairokee's approach to musical protest and by embracing the methods that brought him to prominence, Essam has avoided Cairokee's mistake of losing touch with street level politics and has defined his personal signature as an artist who is both bold and defiant in his messaging.

Essam would continue down this path with his next song, "Mahnash Mn Dol" (We do not Belong to Them). His first song since the military coup, it was released about halfway between when the Morsi government was ousted by the military and when Sisi formally took power as president of Egypt.<sup>149</sup> The video begins with the sound of air raid sirens and a shot of a man in a gas mask (presumably a protester) using his hands to hold up some sort of holographic digital display.<sup>150</sup> On this display are numerous dates starting on January 25<sup>th</sup>,

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<sup>148</sup> الاشتراكيون الثوريون "02/02/2012 In Defense of the Ultras," Scribd, Scribd Inc, Feb. 2, 2012, <https://www.scribd.com/document/80453538/02-02-2012-In-Defense-of-the-Ultras>.

<sup>149</sup> Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam - Mahnash Mn Dol Music Video رمى عصام - محناش من دول ولا دول ولا دول," Youtube, Google, Jan. 24, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMdXoyoZcMs&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMdXoyoZcMs&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>150</sup> Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam - Mahnash Mn Dol Music Video رمى عصام - محناش من دول ولا دول ولا دول," Jan. 24, 2014, 00:14, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMdXoyoZcMs&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMdXoyoZcMs&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

2011, the “Day of Rage” when millions of Egyptians took to the streets for the first time. Other dates correspond with the August 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013 Rabaa massacre where supporters of Morsi took to the streets in opposition of the military and over 1200 were killed, and with the Port Said Stadium Riot, an event to which Essam has already demonstrated a personal connection.<sup>151</sup> The frame switches to Essam, who is shirtless in black and red body paint in what looks like an abandoned apartment bathroom. He begins to sing:<sup>152</sup>

“We don’t belong to them or them or them

Its not a match where whoever scores a goal wins our revolution and takes it home

Take my pledge and the people’s too.”<sup>153</sup>

Throughout this first verse, a multitude of images are seen flashing by: unlit Molotov cocktails, a shirtless man with a bandaged face who writhes in the same bathroom seen before, the protestor protagonist holding his head in frustration, him creeping through alleyways, and a concerned looking woman holding a lantern watching images of the protests being projected on a wall.<sup>154</sup> Essam himself spends most of this verse singing in front of pyrotechnics while performing exaggerated gestures to go along with his singing, a symbol vaguely reminiscent of a swastika is painted behind him in black, white, and red.<sup>155</sup>

From the beginning of the video, the visuals make it abundantly clear that this video is fully engaged with the violent realities of the revolution and the very

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<sup>151</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 139-140.

<sup>152</sup> Ramy Essam, “Mahnash Mn Dol”, 00:37.

<sup>153</sup> Ramy Essam, “Mahnash Mn Dol”, 00:37-01:03; Combined translation.

<sup>154</sup> Ramy Essam, “Mahnash Mn Dol”, 00:30, 00:41, 00:32, 00:50, 01:05.

<sup>155</sup> Ramy Essam, “Mahnash Mn Dol”, 00:44.

real setbacks it has suffered. The dates enumerated on the protestor's holographic display were days of great suffering and tragedy but are still part of a continuing struggle as indicated by the protestor's gas mask, which is at the ready for another engagement with the state. Essam's use of a metaphor comparing the revolution to a soccer match conjures up memories of the infamous Port Said stadium riot, a definite "goal" for the regime and a "loss" for the "Hizb al-Kanaba" who give up when their "team" suffers a setback. The video's tone is also overtly confrontational as the Molotov cocktails, flames, Essam's body language, and the protestor's expression clearly attest. The regime is one that inspires anger and is subsequently met with it. In this regard, Essam continues the themes of his previous releases "Irhal" and "Ya Maglis Yabin Haram" that presented a rough and un-sanitized vision of the Tahrir Square protests. These opening lyrics also assert a separation between the audience and "them" (presumably the Egyptian state) and express an outlook where single victories or defeats do not signify an end to the revolution. This imparts the feeling that no matter what the government does to try and assert its authority over the protestors, they will remain ungovernable.

Essam continues in the next verse:

"We don't belong to them  
We don't belong to their era  
We are the burning light that exposes the beast  
We are the backbone supporting them  
If they ever stand by the truth  
We still don't belong to them, we are not them

And after all, long lives the nation's pride  
A nation that won't retreat to the old  
When the present's flaws start to show  
We don't belong to them  
Those were remnants of the regime and those became remnants too  
And next in turn to be overthrown  
The revolution's rotten complicit elite."<sup>156</sup>

As Essam delivers these lyrics, he and the bandaged figure continue to thrash around. The protestor figure also seems to be placed in peril as his holographic display transforms into a sort of matrix and he responds with a fearful expression on his face.<sup>157</sup> The matrix then seems to entrap the protestor and scan his face, casting a sinister, warped, visage of him.<sup>158</sup> The final chorus is accompanied by a guitar solo with pyrotechnics erupting from the guitar in a rather phallic manner.<sup>159</sup> Essam is seen preparing a Molotov cocktail before he ends the song with a scream befitting of a heavy metal band.<sup>160</sup> The final frames of the video show Essam throwing the cocktail where it then hits a wall featuring the painted visages of numerous Egyptian political leaders from across the spectrum, including Sisi and Morsi.<sup>161</sup>

The lyrics in this passage help further develop and clarify the political perspective of the song. It is not simply focused on being confrontational for confrontation's sake but bases its stance in the trajectory of Egypt's political

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<sup>156</sup> Ramy Essam, "Mahnash Mn Dol", 01:06-01:33; Combined translation.

<sup>157</sup> Ramy Essam, "Mahnash Mn Dol", 01:37.

<sup>158</sup> Ramy Essam, "Mahnash Mn Dol", 02:52.

<sup>159</sup> Ramy Essam, "Mahnash Mn Dol", 02:59.

<sup>160</sup> Ramy Essam, "Mahnash Mn Dol", 03:20, 03:40.

<sup>161</sup> Ramy Essam, "Mahnash Mn Dol", 03:54.

history. The lines “Those were remnants of the regime and those became remnants too, And next in turn to be overthrown...” refer to Mubarak’s old cronies in the SCAF government who seized power but also evoke the rise and fall of Egypt’s ruling systems over the centuries and. Thus, they associate any current or future regime with an air of impermanence. Essam’s audience however is addressed as if they are timeless when he asserts that “we don’t belong to their era.” Along with “long lives the nation’s pride,” Essam’s lyrics characterize the audience as existing above and beyond the petty squabbles of successive regimes and embodying a timeless national spirit that will succeed in the end.

Essam’s body paint further accentuates this incompatibility of the current state and the Egyptian people as the black and red colors are evocative of the pan-Arab colors of the Egyptian flag, the colors of the al-Ahly soccer team, and anarchism.<sup>162</sup> Each of these associations are in some way incompatible with the rule of the regime. Essam reappropriates Egypt’s heritage and colors from the government through his lyrics and dress, in a way creating his own imagined Egyptian nation complete with its own values and symbology. Indeed, with this in mind, the mysterious symbol behind Essam seems more a reconfigured visage of the Egyptian flag’s colors and geometry than an off-brand swastika. Essam then also signals his commemoration of the crimes committed against the al-Ahly Ultras by emblazoning himself in their colors, a reminder that compromise was

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<sup>162</sup> Ian Macdonald, “Pan-Arab Colors,” Flags of the World Website, CRW Flags, Feb. 8, 2020, <https://www.crwflags.com/fotw/flags/xo-arabc.html>; “Al Ahly,” al-Ahly Egypt, al-Ahly Sporting Club, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://www.alahlyegypt.com/en>; “Appendix – The Symbols of Anarchy,” anarchy.be, Anarchist Archive, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <http://www.anarchy.be/faq/append2.html#redblack>.

not an option for them. Given the left-wing political tenor of many ultra soccer groups, al-Ahly's black and red colors evoke an anarchistic rejection of authority that carries over through Essam's body paint, signifying his rejection of the new Sisi regime's authority. This contempt for existing political factions is expressed with finality when Essam tosses his Molotov at the mural and rejects the options he and the audience have been presented as choices for Egypt's future.

Furthermore, Essam's lack of clothing, along with his body paint and use of pyrotechnics makes him appear to be an almost elemental figure in his revolt against the political order with his final scream giving a further primal feeling to his performance. This bolsters the previous line about time being on the side of the protestors because not only do they possess a quality of timelessness because they are members of the timeless Egyptian nation, but the anger they express is timeless because it is also natural. This natural imagery is a cornerstone of constructing primordial nationalisms and it gives credence to the Egyptian nation as imagined by Essam.<sup>163</sup> Compared to the Egypt that is set to be ruled by Sisi, which lacks respect for the country's history and is filled with decrepit leaders of yesteryear, Essam's imagined Egypt is aware of its history, conscious of people's rights, and if Essam's physical appearance and the symbology of the soloing guitar is to be considered, virile. By applying the logic of natural selection to this dilemma, Essam's imagined Egypt would be the obvious choice for a brighter future.

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<sup>163</sup> John Coakley, "“Primordialism” in Nationalism Studies: Theory or Ideology?" *Nations and Nationalism* 24, No. 2 (Apr. 2018): 329-331.

This dynamic of “natural” forms being associated with strength is also present when examining Essam’s foil: the protestor protagonist. The two figures are shown to be on the same side throughout the course of the video, but they are characterized quite differently. Not only is this protagonist skinny as opposed to the muscular Essam, he also relies upon technology such as the holographic display at the beginning of the video. This display later turns on the protestor and traps him within its matrix. While he is portrayed sympathetically throughout the video, he is susceptible to being ensnared within the technology he uses. This is opposed to the masculine and capable Essam who relies on his own qualities, whether they be physical or intangible, to advocate for the revolution. These qualities allow Essam to avoid the entrapped fate of the protestor in the video and deliver his final Molotov-laden message, demonstrating the textual preference towards the approach of the former. This rejection of a reliance on technology further contrasts this video with Cairokee’s “Ethbat Makanak” where a form of technology seems to hijack the video’s plot and muddle its message. The confused messaging present in that song would be impossible in “Mahnash Mn Dol” as Essam embraces a simpler narrative of raw strength and direct action. Thus, Essam appears to be playing a game of political natural selection against two competing players: the incoming regime and his own peers who are still holding on to an idealism that Essam himself once embraced before abandoning. In this contest, he presents his approach as the natural choice.

In the turbulent political aftermath of Mubarak’s resignation, it seems that the interpretation of the revolution present in Essam’s texts has been validated in

comparison to Cairokee's. Essam's return to expressions of anger and calls for direct action as present in "Ya Mahlis Yabin Haram" and continued in "Mahnash Mn Dol" feel very appropriate for the tone of the presidential crisis and the violence that accompanied it, as if he expects treachery from reactionary forces. Cairokee on the other hand seems to have trouble processing that the post-revolution electoral process did not go their way. Beyond its direct, to-the-point messaging, "Mahnash Mn Dol" also shows that Essam has settled into a niche as a political performer, his themes remaining largely consistent with those found in "Ya Mahlis Yabin Haram" but on a bigger budget. Because Essam is able to continue this visceral imagery from his earlier videos but now on a larger platform, it demonstrates his ability to thrive through multiple mediums and a progressing career, not to mention the turbulent politics surrounding the video. This again contrasts with Cairokee, who despite experiencing a meteoric rise onto the world stage, seem to be experiencing a sort of identity crisis in the wake of post-Tahrir chaos. However, the realities of Sisi's hold on Egypt past this point will challenge the views Essam has presented here, and he will be forced to evolve in this new environment or face the consequences.

### The Sisi Presidency–The Present

The aftermath of Sisi's ascension to the presidency has seen the momentum of the original Tahrir Square movement come mostly to a halt, exhausted by years of political turmoil and with the state security apparatus

censoring most dissent.<sup>164</sup> Unrest still exists though as evidenced by an ongoing insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula and embers of the spirit of Tahrir are still occasionally seen in street protests whenever the Sisi regime is accused of something that the Egyptian public finds particularly outrageous.<sup>165</sup> It is within this context that our subject artists must continue to evolve their art and themselves in both as musical and political activists.

Not long after the release of Mahnash Mn Dol, Ramy Essam would find himself under considerable pressure from the Sisi government and was compelled to flee Egypt to exile in Sweden.<sup>166</sup> Soon after his move was publicized, he released a music video for a song entitled “Ah Ya Balad” (Oh Country).<sup>167</sup> The song takes the form of a lament where Essam’s voice is only accompanied by the beat of drum while his words are emphasized with heavy echo effects. The frame opens up with Essam sitting cross legged in black and white tapping along to the drum beat on his legs.<sup>168</sup> Behind him, scenes of the

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<sup>164</sup> Bassiouni, *Chronicles of the Egyptian Revolution*, 307-312.

<sup>165</sup> Allison McManus, “The Egyptian Military’s Terrorism Containment Campaign in North Sinai,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 30, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82218>; Jared Malsin, “The Fate of Two Deserted Islands has Egyptians Taking to the Street Again,” Time, Time USA LLC, Apr. 15, 2016, <https://time.com/4296334/egypt-protests-tiran-sanafir-islands/>; al-Jazeera, “In Rare Protests, Egyptians Demand President Sisi’s Removal,” al-Jazeera, al-Jazeera Media Network, Sep. 21, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/9/21/in-rare-protests-egyptians-demand-president-el-sisis-removal>.

<sup>166</sup> Mohammad Barakat, “Escaping Sisi: Ramy Essam to live in Sweden,” The New Arab, Fadaat Media Ltd, Oct. 22, 2014, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/features/2014/10/27/%EF%BB%BFescaping-sisi-ramy-essam-to-live-in-sweden>.

<sup>167</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam - Ah Ya Balad اه يا بلد - رامى عصام,” Youtube, Google, Oct. 24, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZy-Kr9-il&ab&ab&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZy-Kr9-il&ab&ab&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>168</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam - Ah Ya Balad اه يا بلد - رامى عصام,” Oct. 24, 2014, 00:09, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZy-Kr9-il&ab&ab&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zZy-Kr9-il&ab&ab&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

protests and the destitution of Egyptian slums are projected.<sup>169</sup> In a pained voice, he begins to sing:

“Isolation is my world and my heart is a lover  
My dream a song and my patience a road  
My spirit is soaring and my wound a companion  
Did water ever quench a drowning man’s thirst?  
Was there ever a ray of truth, oh gentlemen?  
In your exaggerated news  
All flashy on screen as usual  
With the fancy words you pick  
Oh country, oh country, oh country  
You have all been exposed  
You have created chaos and not justice  
And for your own gain you cried out: Spy!  
The guard took his post to watch the road  
Did water ever quench a drowning man’s thirst?  
Oh country, oh country, oh country  
What kind of army doesn’t know  
How to protect their own and guard the borders  
And swears at bribes but sympathizes  
With the foreigner’s pure and innocent son  
While the son of the country is imprisoned on false accusations?  
Oh country, oh country, oh country.”<sup>170</sup>

Throughout the song some of the images projected behind Essam correspond directly with the lyrics. Numerous state newscasters are shown while Essam

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<sup>169</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ah Ya Balad,” 00:14, 00:58.

<sup>170</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ah Ya Balad,” 00:20-02:35; Combined translation.

attacks their credibility.<sup>171</sup> Sisi is shown when Essam condemns the army for abandoning and perverting their duties and a stream of pictures featuring wounded or imprisoned Egyptian youths are shown before the final refrain.<sup>172</sup> The song ends on an echo of the word “balad” (country).<sup>173</sup>

The immediate shock of Essam’s exile is apparent in this video as its visual style is in such contrast with his earlier output. Essam’s usual energetic performance is absent and has been replaced by a still and sober cross-legged posture. The fiery and chaotic visuals of “Mahnash Mn Dol” and “Irhal” have had their color washed out. Indeed, Essam’s monotone presentation and restricted movement within the frame gives off the impression that his exile, though technically free, feels more like a prison. However, Essam stays thematically consistent. He insults Sisi and his supporters, specifically taking aim at their technological means of spreading propaganda. A palpable anger comes through in his singing, especially when he mentions the role of army in failing to live up to their duties.<sup>174</sup> This anger against the army feeds back into Essam’s nationalistic themes where he presents himself as knowing better than the powers that be. He asserts that they should be protecting the nation, not giving favors to foreigners, here using the derogatory “khawaga” slang term to refer to those foreigners who exploit Egypt on the regime/army’s watch.<sup>175</sup> The national framing present in the song also provides a contrast to Cairokee’s own forlorn song, “Ya el-Medan.”

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<sup>171</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ah Ya Balad,” 01:02-01:16.

<sup>172</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ah Ya Balad,” 02:05.

<sup>173</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ah Ya Balad,” 02:36-02:37.

<sup>174</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ah Ya Balad,” 02:05.

<sup>175</sup> Issandr al-Amrani, “The Khawaga’s Lament,” Egypt Independent, Al-Masry Al-Youm, Mar. 30, 2011, <https://egyptindependent.com/khawagas-lament/>.

Both songs refer to the loss or potential loss of a physical space within the context of the revolution, but while Cairokee's song focused on the loss of Tahrir Square itself, Essam focuses on the whole of Egypt. While the significance of Tahrir Square is limited in scope by how long it has existed as a physical space and by when the current protests started, Essam's focus on Egypt widens the scope of what is at stake: the whole breadth of Egypt and its thousands of years of history. This sort of dichotomy reinforces the differences we have seen emerge between Cairokee and Essam so far, where the former focuses on the protests as an event that is very much in-the-now while the latter provides a more historical frame. It is clear from this analysis that despite the shock of his exile, the messaging in "Ah Ya Balad" remains fundamentally similar to the work Essam produced while still in Egypt.

Essam's persistence in tone in the face of state repression and exile is notable, but this steadfastness of theme raises questions about the viability of the political responses advocated for in his music. Essam's advocacy of direct action, flagrant disrespect for the powers that be, and use of Egyptian history have not led to any material weakening of the regime, only his exile. And while still maintaining the following of his many fans in Egypt and the attention of academics and politicians outside Egypt, is the reality of exile compatible with the attitude and authority Essam has expressed in his lyrics up to this point? Or will the defiance that has become his trademark run into the same contradictions as Cairokee's idealism? As the stability of the Sisi regime's hold on Egypt began to

look more permanent every day, the musicians of Tahrir Square would once again brace themselves for a new political reality.

After a period of political and musical absence in the first two years of Sisi's rule, Cairokee released their music video for the song "Akher Oghneya" (Last Song) on March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2016.<sup>176</sup> The video begins with the instrumental lead playing over a black screen with white text reading: "No freedom with fear."<sup>177</sup> It wipe fades to a set of railway tracks where all the members of the band are standing with a digital grain applied to the video.<sup>178</sup> The video jump cuts between the band members by using a TV static wipe. Each of the band members hold the camera, the framing implying that the video is being filmed with a cellphone in the "selfie" video style.<sup>179</sup> Amir Eid begins to sing:

"Listen to me, its very useful  
All those defects and traditions  
Society has united against progress  
Tired, unwell, and sick minds  
Search with me, who benefits?  
The beneficiary is the one who controls where you go  
Who makes you passive, who dominates you  
They've imprisoned you inside your mind, your fear is the bars of the cell  
Afraid to think freely, because they might catch you  
My words are not only against the regime, but their slaves too

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<sup>176</sup> "آخر أغنية" - كايروكي - Cairokee - Akher Oghneya," Wayback Machine, Internet Archive, Mar. 12, 2016,

<https://web.archive.org/web/20160318050235/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZu2euuj2GE>.

<sup>177</sup> Omar Mostafa, "آخر أغنية" - كايروكي - Cairokee - Akher Oghneya," Youtube, Google, Mar. 27, 2016, 00:02, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slag5-t5nYA&ab\\_channel=OmarMostafa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slag5-t5nYA&ab_channel=OmarMostafa).

<sup>178</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 00:08.

<sup>179</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 00:08-00:15.

If a hundred thousand regimes fall, we will still be in the same place  
There are things, questions, and traditions that became defects  
Traditions require progress and history is repeating itself  
There is a war against freedom, it is forbidden  
People with backwards minds have the loudest words  
We've been raised where the walls have ears  
Ok, turn down the music, let them hear clearly:  
If this is my last song I'll be singing about freedom  
So sing in a loud voice with me: Freedom!"<sup>180</sup>

Throughout this first verse and chorus, the band proceeds walking down the secluded railroad tracks while continuing the TV static jump cuts between members. Additionally, the frame is interrupted by more TV static wipes that insert "no signal" signs and pictures of the past protests for a split second before returning to the band.<sup>181</sup> This makes the pictures much more difficult to focus on than the stock photos of protests in earlier Cairokee videos. Some can, however, be picked out such as one of Bassem Youssef and a collage of Egyptian political figures from across the political spectrum, very similar to the one that appeared in Ramy Essam's "Mahnash Mn Dol."<sup>182</sup>

The four years that have passed since the release of Ethbat Makanak, including all the setbacks experienced by the protest movement, are evident from the start of the video. Its opening notes sound like an out of tune feedback loop when compared with the warm sounding chords of their earlier releases. Amir Eid's tone of voice sounds resigned, the band members wear sunglasses and

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<sup>180</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 00:13-01:10; Combined translation.

<sup>181</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 00:13.

<sup>182</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 00:19, 00:51.

scowl as they slowly walk along the railroad tracks which gives a similarly cool impression. If these visual cues were not enough to convey to the viewer that Cairokee's outlook on Egypt's current state has changed, the lyrics make it abundantly clear. Eid's assertion that "society has rejected progress" and no mention of any ongoing movements to support show just how far things have drifted away from the early days at Tahrir Square. While "Ethbat Makanak" was characterized by its confused overcrowded visual and lyrical presentation, "Akher Oghneya" seems to be filled with a certain sense of clarity as they walk confidently down the tracks, a clarity that reveals the grim current state of the revolution.

The lyrics serve almost as an autopsy of what was wrong both with the revolution and with their earlier songs. It acknowledges that the Tahrir movement failed to make permanent inroads with broader Egyptian society hence its "rejection of progress." This rejection is seen in events such as the usurpation of the revolution by the Muslim Brotherhood and the co-optation of the image of Tahrir by the Tamarod movement that helped push Sisi to power.<sup>183</sup> Instead of advocating for a sense of vague persistence/resistance as in earlier songs, the lyrics directly acknowledge the stifling and repressive environment generations of Egyptians have lived through and the mental scars it has left on them. This acknowledgement turns the focus of the song's lyrics more towards introspection and catharsis rather than some ill-defined goal. This realignment of Cairokee's lyrical outlook produces a similar sense of introspection and catharsis found in

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<sup>183</sup> Linda Herrera, *Revolution in the Age of Social Media*, 136-137.

Essam's "Mahnash Mn Dol." The assertion that "if a hundred thousand regimes fell we would be in the same place" imparts a similar feeling of timelessness towards the audience/Egyptian people as Essam's lyrics did. This quasi-historical perspective appears again when the song acknowledges the mutation of past traditions as the roots of current problems. Further flirtation with Essam-esque themes appear in the "us v.s. them" position pitting the audience against the regime and those (slaves) who are controlled by them. Catharsis comes in the last line of the chorus where the lyrics no longer address Tahrir Square in praise or command the audience to hold their ground as they did before, but now joins with them in a group shout of "Freedom!"<sup>184</sup>

As the band continues their resigned march down the tracks, the second verse begins:

"Freedom means changes  
It means freedom of thought and expression  
Freedom means your choice, not someone else's  
It's a conflict of generations  
My eyes become yours  
They want you to walk their path  
Instead of your own  
Old men want to live in the past and control the present  
Reminds me of the skenshizer commercial  
No matter how long I talk, my voice is unheard  
To them, my words are always empty and unworthy  
Let me dream a new dream, one out of the ordinary  
I don't want to walk with a flock of sheep

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<sup>184</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 01:09.

Our country is young, most are youths  
You've killed their devotion and closed every window  
We have great dreams, give me the chance to lead  
It's my goal to see the country rise  
The number 7 can be read as 8  
If you see it from the other side."<sup>185</sup>

The split-second jump cuts appear again in this verse with a photo of Egypt's legendary president Nasser corresponding to the lines "Old men want to live in the past and control the present."<sup>186</sup> And during this verse's chorus when the whole band lends their voices to a group shout of "Freedom", the video cuts to a longer video clip of protesters at the original Tahrir Square protest waving Egyptian flags.<sup>187</sup>

Here the sense of historicism in the text deepens as Cairokees are explicitly identifying Egypt's current political and social habits as a legacy of the Nasser era, long since misshapen by corruption into the modern form of the Sisi government. This idea of the once proud past being tarnished is connected to the modern context when Eid states how the phenomenon reminds him of the "skenshizer" commercial, a Ramadan advertisement for Nestle Crunch snacks released in 2015.<sup>188</sup> In the commercial, an Egyptian youth eats the new snack while his uncle mistakes it for a snack from his youth. He rambles on about it while the youth plays along, knowing he cannot change his uncle's mind,

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<sup>185</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 01:43-02:33; Combined translation.

<sup>186</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 01:57.

<sup>187</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 02:45.

<sup>188</sup> Crunch Egypt, "إعلان كرنش رمضان 2015 – زمن كرنش- نسخة البيت," Youtube, Google, Jun. 17, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNyy013n0Gw&ab\\_channel=CrunchEgypt](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fNyy013n0Gw&ab_channel=CrunchEgypt).

illustrating how Egypt's older generations seem to content themselves with their past while ignoring what is going on in the present. The commercial was tremendously popular in Egypt for its illustration of the generational divide in a humorous and non-confrontational way.<sup>189</sup> Eid's reference to it here creates a continuity between the highs of the Nasser era that older generations still cling to and the youth's disillusionment with what that society has become today. In doing this, it humanizes a segment of the Egyptian population that the Tahrir movement failed to win over during the revolution.

While the song may convey frustration towards the older generation for contributing to the current state of Egypt, it does not seem to harbor an irreconcilable grudge towards them. In fact, after the next lines cajole the older generation for silencing the voices and closing the opportunities for young Egyptians, an appeal towards reconciliation is made. When Eid asserts that the Arabic symbols for the numbers seven and eight look like the other when viewed upside down (7/8), he gives the impression that the differences that divide Egyptians can be reconciled if they would just come to understand their common ground. It is here where Cairokee, despite adopting many of the themes present in Essam's previous works, develop their own way of responding to the Sisi regime. Instead of using historical callbacks as jumping off points for violent ideation, they use those callbacks to suggest the possibility of connection with those they couldn't reach before. The texts of Cairokee's music videos have

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<sup>189</sup> "Generation Hels: Why that Nestle Crunch ad hit such a nerve," Enterprise, Enterprise Ventures LLC, Jun. 24, 2015, <https://enterprise.press/2015/06/24/generation-hels-why-that-nestle-crunch-ad-hit-such-a-nerve/>.

always conveyed a desire to accomplish some sort of goal, whether that goal was achievable or not. But in “Akher Oghneya,” Cairokee’s newfound clarity is put towards identifying a new, more achievable goal: consensus. This consensus is not to be made with the regime, far from it, but seeks to reach and find common ground with an “other,” this other being Egypt’s older generations. This lies in contrast to Essam, who used a brutally honest view of Egyptian society to rationalize his appeals to anger and direct action. In light of Essam’s current banishment from Egypt at the time of this song’s release, “Akher Oghneya’s” more discrete form of resistance enmeshes itself in another goal that becomes more apparent as the song approaches its final verse: survival.

The verse begins:

“Guess what? They say I'm afraid  
Move aside and put on some lipstick  
There’s a revolution inside and it’s still going  
The dream lives with me, my speech is free  
I sang in all ages, I was the voice when they wanted the world silent  
Freedom means sacrifices, and it’s a test, I take the responsibility for the journey  
I am not alone, I am an idea,  
Like a seed, you will bury it and it will sprout  
I'll never sell our dream and the martyrs who came before us  
Take me into your prison so I can see our youth  
Real men live in prisons.”<sup>190</sup>

The images flashed on screen during this segment include a picture of the Tunisian protests which preceded the ones in Egypt and a compilation of scenes

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<sup>190</sup> Omar Mostafa, “Akher Oghneya,” 03:19-04:03; Combined translation.

from Cairokee's previous music videos.<sup>191</sup> As the video enters its final chorus the TV static jump cuts between members increase in speed, increased digital distortion is applied to the screen, and a buffering symbol starts appearing to freeze the on-screen motion of the band members.<sup>192</sup> The video ends with a hard cut to credits.

Throughout its run time, the video's lyrical and visual shifts in tone have directly engaged with Cairokee's earlier videos: references to them abound throughout the video. The filming style echoes their seminal work "Sout al-Horeya" which was also filmed in the handheld cellphone camera style. Just as previous videos either name-dropped or incorporated the lyrics of this song into a subsequent video, "Sout al-Horeya" is lyrically referenced in the chorus' final shout: "So sing in a loud voice with me: Freedom!" However, most of the references to their earlier releases here have a foreboding quality. They are overwhelmingly recontextualized in a way that warps their original presentation. When the black and white photo of Bassem Youssef's face flashes in front of the frame for a split second, it feels more like seeing a ghost than it does the stern newscaster from Ethbat Makanak. In contrast to Sout al-Horeya where the faux-cellphone framing presented the audience with a crisp and clear image, here that sort of framing delivers a fuzzy and distorted image. Indeed, as the video concludes, the digital medium on which the video is presented and which was a common motif in Cairokee's previous releases literally starts to fall apart. The

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<sup>191</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 03:28, 03:32-03:33.

<sup>192</sup> Omar Mostafa, "Akher Oghneya," 04:04-04:16.

finale of the song ends in lyrical irony: when Eid proclaims his last song with a voice calling for freedom, he is looking directly into the face of his first song where he did the same, the one that was supposed to be a start of a new future for Egypt. In a way, this would be Cairokee's last song. However, it would not be their last song as a band, as activists, or as Egyptians. Rather, it would be their last song as the idealistic young band that happened to go viral at one of the critical points in Egypt's history.

It is also notable that "Akher Oghneya" has an incredibly similar look to a previous Cairokee music video "Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot" (People Dancing and People Dying) from early 2014.<sup>193</sup> This video is filmed in the same "selfie" style as "Akher Oghneya" is, as it is filmed along the same railroad tracks, has a similar digital grain applied to the footage, and even has a few of the TV static cuts.<sup>194</sup> The lyrics of the song are an indictment of the hypocritical injustice found in Egyptian society where "some people dance" and "some people die."<sup>195</sup> While "Akher Oghneya" may at first appear to be a rehashing of "Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot," it should be noted that much of the aforementioned similarities exist in a more toned-down state. Only Amir Eid walks down the tracks, TV static jump cuts are few and far between, and the blue filter does not evoke the same feeling of distortion as the dirtier yellow filter on "Akher Oghneya" does. Lyrically, the song also lacks the historical references and introspective approach towards

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<sup>193</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Cairokee - Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot | ناس بترقص وناس بتموت," Youtube, Google, Feb. 1, 2014, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmpaSADK1mY&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XmpaSADK1mY&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial).

<sup>194</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Cairokee - Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot | ناس بترقص وناس بتموت," Feb. 1, 2014, 00:25, 03:08.

<sup>195</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot," 1:12-1:14.

society and the band themselves that have such a prominent place in “Akher Oghneya.” Much like the other references to earlier Cairokee releases in the song, the visual similarities between “Akher Oghneya” and “Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot” provide a callback to earlier moments in Cairokee’s career from which “Akher Oghneya” expands upon. The relatively barren visual frame of “Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot” is now filled with symbolism of Cairokee’s experiences over the years in “Akher Oghneya” and the fairly boiler plate lyrics about injustice are replaced by ones that are much more introspective. Ultimately, “Nas Betoros W Nas Betmoot” serves as a visual canvas on which the pivotal moment of “Akher Oghneya” is constructed.

In light of what was going on around Cairokee at the time of this “Akher Oghneya’s” release, this shift to distance themselves from their past seems rather judicious. Their contemporary Essam had been forced to flee the country two years prior because of his musical activism. Additionally, just a month before the release of the video, the brazen torture and murder of Italian graduate student Giulio Regeni by state security forces demonstrated just how bold the new Sisi regime could be towards those it deemed as a threat.<sup>196</sup> Ramzy catalogued this perception of the moment in her own study of Cairokee’s music that fans thought that “...they (Cairokee) were next in next line to forcibly disappear.... ...they were holding their breath, waiting for the dreadful

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<sup>196</sup> Stephanie Kirchgaessner, “Italian student Giulio Regeni found dead in Cairo 'with signs of torture',” The Guardian, Guardian News & Media Limited, Feb. 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/04/italian-student-found-dead-egypt-giulio-regeni-torture>.

headlines.”<sup>197</sup> But Cairokee did not disappear; they actually became even bigger. From this point onward, Cairokee would reimagine themselves as a band that would continue to operate in an Egypt ruled by Sisi. They would stay out of prison by reconfiguring how they presented both their lyrical and visual texts to still deliver criticisms of Egypt’s current state, but simultaneously skirt around the powerful arms of censors and enforcers.

Just a few months after the release of Cairokee’s “last song,” Essam released a music video entitled “Harara.”<sup>198</sup> The frame opens to the sound of emergency sirens with Essam, blindfolded, super-imposed over fiery scenes of the protests, protestors in gasmasks, and police in riot gear.<sup>199</sup> A recording of a statement from an Egyptian defense official from 2011 is heard in which the speaker downplays the use of force against protestors at an incident on Mohammed Mahmud Street, where the entrance to the Egyptian Interior Ministry is located.<sup>200</sup> After a minute of this ambient introduction, an electric guitar starts to hit notes and Essam starts to sing:

Why did the truth in my eyes offend you?  
They had only your image with the gun  
Good job oh Basha, you broke it  
But the truth lives forever in these wounds  
See yourself in my eyes, coward

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<sup>197</sup> Carolyn Ramzy, “The Revolution Did Not Take Place,” 13-14.

<sup>198</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam - Harara | حراره – عصام – رامى,” Youtube, Google, Jul. 25, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzVZkv7HyDo&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzVZkv7HyDo&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>199</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam - Harara | حراره – عصام – رامى,” Jul. 25, 2016, 00:04-00:30, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzVZkv7HyDo&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xzVZkv7HyDo&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>200</sup> Ramy Essam, “Harara,” 00:21-01:02; Shaimaa Khalil, “Egypt: The legacy of Mohammed Mahmoud Street,” BBC News, BBC, Nov. 19, 2012, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-20395260>.

A serial killer but blind  
I keep the wound in my eyes as an honor  
Remembering your image in the darkness  
My heart burns hotter than the sun  
My heart doesn't want a new start  
Now I only see through the eyes of rage  
Standing in the frontline with Harara."<sup>201</sup>

The imagery throughout these first verses sees Essam's visage multiply as he sways with the music, at one point there are five of him on screen.<sup>202</sup> The second verse repeats the lyrics of the first but is now done in a rapped style with two blindfolded Essams facing each other while the lyrics appear on screen one word at a time.<sup>203</sup> The video closes out with a short, repeated clip of a young police officer with a shotgun before transitioning to a picture of the eponymous Ahmed Harara and his glass eye with the word "huriyya" (freedom) inscribed on it.<sup>204</sup>

As soon as Essam begins singing it is clear that "Harara" is Essam returning to form in his exile. The lyrics ridiculing the violence of security forces are angry and sarcastic, the instrumentals follow a hard rock beat, and the subject matter is characteristically extreme. The melancholy presentation of "Ah Ya Balad" seems to have been a onetime thing. Aside from being graphic, the cross section of lyrical and visual imagery in the song is some of Essam's most clever and impactful yet. The whole song revolves around the blinding of protestor Ahmed Harara who was blinded on the original January 25<sup>th</sup> Day of

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<sup>201</sup> Ramy Essam, "Harara," 01:11-02:31; Combined translation.

<sup>202</sup> Ramy Essam, "Harara," 01:52.

<sup>203</sup> Ramy Essam, "Harara," 02:50-03:18.

<sup>204</sup> Ramy Essam, "Harara," 03:51-04:10.

Rage and became a subsequent symbol of the revolution.<sup>205</sup> Throughout the video, Essam uses a blindfold to symbolize the sight that was taken from Harara. With his duplicates seen periodically throughout the video, he conveys that this is a sort of wound suffered by many people throughout the revolution. After donning the blindfold, the lyrics Essam sings are presented as a post-blinding confrontation with the “blinder” which vicariously gives Harara or anyone else harmed by the Egyptian state a way to confront those who have hurt them.

But Essam does not just portray the experience of being blinded as a blunt act of state oppression; through his lyrics he constructs it as a desperate attempt by agents of the state to enforce a sort of censorship to cover up their crimes. What prompts the blinding in the first place is the anger the “blinder” feels when they observe their own image reflected in the eyes of the protestors. They shoot to blind and hence cover up this ugly reflection of themselves. In doing this, Essam empowers those who might otherwise be construed as powerless victim, as what prompted their maiming was their ability to threaten and unnerve the state, not the impunity of the state. Essam expands upon this theme by chiding the “blinder” on the ineffectiveness because much like Harara himself after his blinding, Essam in the song continues onward: “Now I only see through the eyes of rage.” The fact that Essam emphasizes the compelling nature of peoples’ eyes in this song is significant. It echoes his earlier themes that seem to prioritize the strength of “natural” means of resistance over technological ones as seen in

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<sup>205</sup> Abigail Hauslohner, “Why I Protest: Ahmed Harara of Egypt,” Time, Time USA, Dec. 14, 2011, [http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745\\_2102138\\_2102236,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102138_2102236,00.html).

“Mahnash Mn Dol.” In the song, eyes are construed as having the ability to record and reflect the injustice going on around them to such an extent that the state feels they must destroy the function of this body part to censor it. This provides a fascinating contrast to how often cellphones and the internet were spoken of as having the same qualities and how they were subsequently the subject of mass censorship attempts by the Egyptian state.<sup>206</sup> Here, eyes and the people they are connected to are shown to be just as capable of challenging state authority as any new piece of technology and they worry the state just as much. Furthermore, this reinforces Essam’s previous characterizations of the Egyptian people as ultimately beyond the control of the state because almost all people have eyes and thus have access to the ability to challenge the state portrayed here.

Despite the poignant impact of Essam’s imagery throughout the song, it is not free of at least a few creeping contradictions. First and foremost is the effect that Essam’s known exile has on the lyrics. When Essam says he is “standing in the frontline with Harara,” we know he is actually thousands of miles away in Sweden, even if they may have crossed paths at the Tahrir protests in early 2011. The age of the events referenced in the song poses another issue as well. While without doubt, people were still being maimed by Egyptian security forces at the time of this song’s publishing, Essam’s distance from Egypt and the time passed since Harara’s blinding make it feel that Essam is ever so slightly falling

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<sup>206</sup> Charles Arthur, “Egypt Blocks Social Media Websites in Attempted Clampdown on Unrest,” The Guardian, Guardian News and Media Limited, Jan. 26, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/jan/26/egypt-blocks-social-media-websites>.

behind. Even if another protestor was blinded right before the song was written, Essam would not be there to witness it in the way he had witnessed the protests at Tahrir when he composed “Irhal.” It is questionable if he could bring the same honest emotion to the table in this circumstance. That is not to say Essam is out of touch, but his consistency in image and tone are starting to chafe up against the realities of his exiled life, especially when Cairokee just a few months prior released a video that seemed to signal the end of an era for popular political music in Egypt as it had been known.

A little over a year after the release of Cairokee’s “Last Song,” they made a triumphant return with a series of 11 music videos. All the songs in this series of videos were from their “Drop of White” album and all were filmed with the band performing the songs together in a recording studio.<sup>207</sup> This series of videos would prove to be nothing less than a reinvention of Cairokee as this series took them to their highest levels of popularity yet, pulling in hundreds of millions of views across all videos. The most popular of these videos being “as-Sekka Shmal Fi Shmal” (Wrong Way Blues), which as of this writing has eighty-eight million views, far more than any of their viral hits which initially brought them to prominence.<sup>208</sup> The video begins with a camera panning around the recording studio. The video quality is exceptionally crisp and most of the band members are wearing slick-looking leather jackets.<sup>209</sup> The camera pans up to Amir Eid,

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<sup>207</sup> “Review: Cairokee – Drop of White,” The African Triangle, The African Triangle, Sep. 9, 2017, <https://theafricantriangle.com/2017/09/09/cairokee-dropofwhite-review/>.

<sup>208</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - Wrong way blues / السكه شمال في شمال - كايروكي,” Youtube, Google, Jul. 10, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdvxvQ9h2AA&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdvxvQ9h2AA&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial).

<sup>209</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - Wrong way blues / السكه شمال في شمال - كايروكي,” Jul. 10, 2017, 00:07-00:21, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdvxvQ9h2AA&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RdvxvQ9h2AA&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial).

who appears to have lost a noticeable amount of weight from his previous appearances, he begins to sign:

“The wrong way is the way as the right has vanished  
The days spin us around  
Walk it straight, you’ll take biggest stake  
Walk it crooked, you’ll rise above  
Never ask “Why or from where did you get this?”  
Have a joint and a bottle  
Stay away from politics  
Sleep and don’t bother  
These topics are difficult and sensitive  
You won’t be needed  
Your end, a tear and a funeral  
The low ones are on high  
What is cheap is dear  
And once again we no longer belong here  
So I’ll keep singing and repeat my words  
On the path that is before me, wrong is the way  
They rob us and act as if they are one of us  
Some dye their hair and some cover in henna  
The old guard are driving us flat into a wall  
A broken engine without a rotor  
If you are needy, you will bear the burden  
Forget your rights, don’t ask again  
Walk next to the wall, don’t draw attention  
Dig a hole and bury your head in it  
The low ones are on high  
What is cheap is dear  
And once again we no longer belong here

So I'll keep singing and repeat my words

On the path that is before me, wrong is the way.”<sup>210</sup>

As the video ends, one at first feels a bit taken aback by how much this video departs from their earlier work. Explicit visual text outside of the band performing has all but disappeared. Accentuations still appear, such as when Eid runs his hand along his hair during the lyric about dyed hair and when band members look at each and both sing a lyric, but the change is stark.<sup>211</sup> These visual changes all contribute to a much more contemporary sense of style than seen in earlier Cairokee videos. This shift in visuals is accompanied by a shift in their lyrics as well.

Lyrically, the song revolves around the concept of the “wrong/left way” being the direction that Egypt is headed in, left (shmal) being held as the opposite of the typical “right” (yamīn) way which has either vanished or become disadvantageous to follow. The straightforward and honest nature of the right way contrasts with the figuratively and literally crooked nature of the turn towards the wrong/left way. This establishes the fundamental message of the song, that in current day Egypt, the crooked way is the only way to get ahead. Eid then goes on to describe those who succeed following this crooked path. He sarcastically remarks how one should not question why some have succeeded in money and politics, recommending that it would be better to distract themselves with intoxicants lest they suffer a forgotten and obscure fate. He further describes these “low ones on high” as practicing a sort of social camouflage to aid

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<sup>210</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Wrong Way Blues,” 00:16-02:24; Combined translation.

<sup>211</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Wrong Way Blues,” 01:45, 00:43.

themselves in their schemes: they enhance their appearance with fancy hairstyles and henna tattoos, as if without this their crooked nature would be obvious. He further identifies this group as “the old guard,” who on top of following an immorally crooked path, follow an illogically crooked one as they, as Egypt’s political and class leaders, are about to metaphorically drive the nation into a wall. In response to this dubious state of affairs, Eid says that he will keep singing as he has always done while asserting that: “On the path that is before me, wrong is the way.” This imparts the feeling that Eid cannot do anything himself to change the path that the country is headed in, but at the very least he can assert that the path it is going in is indeed wrong, unlike those who would rather “dig a hole and bury (their) head in it.”

While the lyrics of this song are no less political than any other Cairokee song as they directly address themes of corruption and repression, there is a noticeable lack of specificity in them that complements the sparse visual imagery of the video. No specific events or people are mentioned, there are no movements to support or days to remember and Egypt itself is never explicitly mentioned. There is however a broad appeal to the audience to commiserate with the fact that Egyptian society is deeply unjust, almost to the point of ridiculousness. Strikingly, Cairokee makes no reference to any of their old music in this video either. This is in contrast to “Akher Oghneya” where the song’s direct visual and lyrical references to their music are a significant part of why the video is so impactful. The song also radiates a similar feeling of catharsis found in “Akher Oghneya” in that even if they cannot change society, they can still assert

their objection to its wrongs. However, Cairokee does not convey this catharsis by an impassioned and climactic shout for freedom as if it were their last words. Rather, it is conveyed by the slickness with which they use their new identity to deliver the message of the song, full of vagueness and just barely passing by the censors. This is accentuated by the moments when band members make eye contact with each other in a wink-wink nod-nod fashion, letting the audience know that they have found a way to avoid what looked to be their imminent demise and now revel in it. It is almost as if they are a totally new band. Indeed, Eid himself looks almost like a different person at first due to his weight loss. It is remarkable that in the face of the hopeless and unjust situation described in the song, Cairokee appear much more confident in their message than they have in years, but as an exercise in cathartic defiance, it is all they can do.

In this, Cairokee seems to have shifted their political messaging to be less direct and inflammatory. This accomplishes two things; it first broadens the groups of people who can be exposed to Cairokee's message as music that is not explicitly a protest song may be more digestible to the average listener. This helps remedy Cairokee's well-established issue of misjudging their reach and appeal. By looking at the impressive view count of this video, it seems it may be working. An example of these indirect lyrics with broad appeal is found in the line "the old ('Awagīz) are at the wheel," which at first may seem to clash with "Akher Oghneya's" attempts at generational consensus. However, the significant amount of othering that is applied to "the low ones" in this song creates a sense for the audience that "the old" referred to in the song are not their older relatives

and neighbors, but a select group of powerful people who happen to be old such as the leaders of the Sisi regime. This is the justification for this translation's use of the term "old guard" as it demonstrates the ability of this line to appeal to a broader sense of dissatisfaction than they could if they focused in on one politician. Secondly, Cairokee's vague political messaging begins the process of constructing a sort of plausible deniability on the part of the band members. They have severed their allusions to their old songs and never mention anything by name. They show nothing on screen that directly attacks the Sisi regime or its actions, as it is not illegal in Egypt to be upset with politics, the economy, or society in general, at least not yet. If the government made a concentrated effort to suppress or punish Cairokee for their music, it would doubtlessly be successful. But the dramatic shift that Cairokee has made from the presentation of their earlier music shows that they are employing a strategic savviness of self-censorship in an Egypt where open opposition to the state is almost guaranteed to attract punitive attention. Ramzy identified this shift in Cairokee's music as being part of a "quiet politics" that at times seems to border on cynicism but is ultimately a reflection of Egypt's post-revolutionary landscape where the spaces and methods that brought artists such as Cairokee to prominence are no longer viable or safe.<sup>212</sup>

In early 2018, Ramy Essam released one of his most successful songs to date, "Balaha."<sup>213</sup> Like many of his earlier works, "Balaha" has Essam deliver

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<sup>212</sup> Carolyn Ramzy, "The Revolution Did Not Take Place," 4.

<sup>213</sup> Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam - Balaha | بلحه – رامي عصام," Youtube, Google, Feb. 26, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjBd\\_rvZr4U&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjBd_rvZr4U&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

another anthemic political performance. Lyrically, the song focuses on criticizing president Sisi using the coded moniker “Balaha” which has two meanings/origins. The first derives from a dishonest character of the same name from the film *El-Donya ‘ala Genah Yamama* and is used to describe contempt for Sisi’s incompetence as a leader.<sup>214</sup> The second is a way of disguising this criticism without mentioning his name, as “balaha” also means dates.<sup>215</sup> The video begins with an old sampled recording of the song “Helwa Ya Balaha Ya Mam ‘a’a” (Oh Sweet, Decadent Date).<sup>216</sup> Ramy Essam appears on screen, he is wearing sunglasses and a white fur shoulder cape; he takes a bite of a date and puts his fingers together in an expression of satisfaction.<sup>217</sup> The sample gives way to hard rock guitars and Essam begins to sing:

“Oh Balaha  
 Oh sweet, decadent date  
 Your four years have passed  
 Your presence has graced us for so long  
 Bored us, enough with your existence  
 May God shine a light on your baldness  
 You receive your share of the prayer

<sup>214</sup> Magdi Mustafa, “The Limits of the Permissible and the Forbidden in the Politicization of Dates in Egypt,” al-Jazeera, al-Jazeera Media Network, May 4, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.net/news/politics/2020/5/4/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1-%D8%A8%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%A9-%D8%B9%D8%A8%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%B3%D9%8A-%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%8A-%D8%AD%D8%A8%D8%B4-%D8%B3%D8%AC%D9%86>.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid.

<sup>216</sup> Ramy Essam, “حلوة يا بلحة يا مقمعه - أحمد الشريف,” Youtube, Google, Nov. 3, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3ugoJvHUr0&ab\\_channel=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8F%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%AC%D9%8Aaltohfafe](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3ugoJvHUr0&ab_channel=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D9%8F%D8%AD%D9%81%D8%AC%D9%8Aaltohfafe).

<sup>217</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam - Balaha | بلحه – عصام – رامى,” Feb. 26, 2018, 00:01-00:06, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjBd\\_rvZr4U&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FjBd_rvZr4U&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

For you to gather up your cronies  
And get on the chain gang  
Four years flew by  
While the people cannot get their allowance  
You held out your hand to everyone  
You filled the bellies of your judges  
And said you would build a new generation  
But built a prison with iron gates  
Thank you oh leader of loafers  
A failure to the sky, a failure across the land  
Through your shame you said "sell the land"  
Oh you raggedy ball, they pass you between themselves  
They stole the Nile and gave you a dam  
You dug a canal hoping to profit  
And we knew it was just a hole and a setup  
I hope you get some reward!  
Oh sweet, decadent date  
Nanana, Nanana, Nanana  
Terror increased and did not end  
The cuckolded media does not satisfy  
Drumming up support, licking it up, cheating within cheating  
The people struggle finding their bread  
But the bread is sweat in the mouth of the army  
Distracting the people with a football match  
Oh leader of the air-headed regime  
Oh sweet, decadent date  
Building your new city, making a fence  
And your friends eat all the desserts  
Left us to drown in the constitution  
The people have had enough, revealing what is hidden

Your jewels  
Worn by your legs  
Your balls become  
Just a child's toy

Who is that who flattens us? Balaha!

Who is that who misleads us? Balaha!"<sup>218</sup>

Throughout the course of the song, Essam is seen energetically dancing and jumping around to the music as he sings, his bombastic outfit giving him an additional level of confident swagger. His performance also incorporates teasing gestures as he continues to eat dates and wave them in front of the camera and when he gets to the rhyme that references Sisi's testicles, he uses his hands to gesture the swinging of two objects while making his voice sound uncharacteristically nasal.<sup>219</sup> He also occasionally throws on a Mardi Gras style face mask styled after a crown, which he wears while again eating dates in an outhouse.<sup>220</sup> The look and energy of all these visual elements give the video a vibrant feel despite its unremarkable suburban background.

While this sarcastic and humorous tone is not Essam's typical method of delivery, his referencing of current events in Egypt through it hints towards a deep-seated anger. Essam rails against Sisi's impending indefinite term limits, the corruption of his administration, its wastefulness in government projects, and the general injustice it perpetrates.<sup>221</sup> Essam directly responds to these injustices

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<sup>218</sup> Ramy Essam, "Balaha," 00:11-03:54; Combined translation.

<sup>219</sup> Ramy Essam, "Balaha," 00:16, 03:01-03:08.

<sup>220</sup> Ramy Essam, "Balaha," 04:12.

<sup>221</sup> Shahira Amin, "Proposal to Extend Sisi's Term Sparks Controversy in Egypt," al-Monitor, Al-Monitor LLC, Aug. 17, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/08/egypt-parliament-proposal-amend-extend-sisi-term-controversy.html>.

by suggesting that the regime's leaders be imprisoned in the country's famous agricultural prison complex (hence this translation's use of the phrase "chain gang") and insisting that other world powers are playing Sisi while he undertakes his various mega-projects.<sup>222</sup> Essam demonstrates the same socially aware anger that is his trademark, but in "Balaha," the way that anger is expressed has changed from Essam violently ideating to him channeling that anger into sarcasm and parody. Indeed, by changing his way of expressing anger at Egypt's political situation, Essam is able to further sharpen the wit he has demonstrated before in songs such as "Harara" with even more layered lyrical references.

The aforementioned lyrics where Essam sings a rhyme mocking Sisi's testicles are an excellent example of this, as the rhyme incorporates additional themes beyond just a vulgar reference. The rhyme itself is a corrupted version of "Hala'atak Birgalatak" which is a rhyme sung to Egyptian children at their Sebou' celebration seven days after birth.<sup>223</sup> Essam's version of it keeps the first two lines the same and then introduces two of his own, first referencing Sisi's testicles, his "things" (حجئاتك).<sup>224</sup> He then references a popular children's clacker toy imported from Saudi Arabia known generally in Egypt as "بندولات" (pendulums)

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<sup>222</sup> Ramy Essam, "Balaha," 00:36; "We are in Tombs" Abuses in Egypt's Scorpion Prison," Human Rights Watch, Human Rights Watch, Sep. 28, 2016, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/09/28/we-are-tombs/abuses-egypts-scorpion-prison>; Aidan Lewis and Mohamed Abdellah, "Egypt Prepares to Move to New Capital, Away from the Chaos of Cairo," Reuters, Reuters, Mar. 17, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-new-capital/egypt-prepares-to-start-move-to-new-capital-away-from-the-chaos-of-cairo-idUSKBN2B91X3>; Heba Habib and Erin Cunningham, "Egypt's "Gift to the World" Cost \$8 Billion and Probably Wasn't Necessary," The Washington Post, The Washington Post, Aug. 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/08/06/egypts-gift-to-the-world-cost-8-billion-and-probably-wasnt-necessary/>.

<sup>223</sup> Mohsen Ali, "أغنية السبوع ... حلقاتك برجالائك ... حمادة هلال," Youtube, Google, Aug. 27, 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FruyqVSK5iU&ab\\_channel=MohsenAli](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FruyqVSK5iU&ab_channel=MohsenAli).

<sup>224</sup> Ramy Essam, "Balaha," 03:05.

that was subsequently banned by the government after people started referring to them as “Sisi’s balls.”<sup>225</sup> In creating this corrupted rhyme, Essam humiliates Sisi in several ways. Firstly, he infantilizes him by addressing the president in the form of a song meant for children with a mocking voice, attributing his previously stated failures to a childlike incompetence. Secondly, he symbolically castrates him by asserting that his testicles are exactly like the cheap plastic children’s toy Sisi was so offended by, as if banning them is an implicit acknowledgement of the accuracy of the comparison. Essam furthers this allusion with his swinging hand gestures. While Essam could have most definitely gotten his hands on a clacker toy to visually represent these lyrics as he does with the dates in the song, instead he shows only a mimicking motion. The referenced objects, just like Sisi’s manhood, are missing. Essam similarly attacks the integrity of Sisi’s media with a similar deprivation of manhood with the exceedingly vulgar term “معرض” which implies a state of cuckoldry.<sup>226</sup> When placed in context with the lyrics about other powers taking advantage of Egypt politically and economically, this reference indicts not only Sisi’s media as lacking the masculine integrity or ability to protect Egypt, but the entire regime as well.

In total, these are exceptionally brutal attacks on the image of Sisi as a strong and dignified leader that the regime tries to maintain. This sort of multi-layered personal attack has not really been seen before in Essam’s music, but

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<sup>225</sup> Ramy Essam, “Balaha,” 03:07; Mohammed Mahmoud, “‘Sisi’s balls’ are no laughing matter for Egypt’s police,” Middle East Eye, Middle East Eye, Nov. 16, 2017, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/features/sisis-balls-are-no-laughing-matter-egypts-police>; “مصر تحارب لعبة السعوديين الشهيرة,” Mz-Mz, Mz-Mz Publishing Group, Nov. 8, 2017, <https://mz-mz.net/869006/>.

<sup>226</sup> Ramy Essam, “Balaha,” 02:26.

the sarcastic and vengeful delivery of these innuendos greatly expand upon Essam's ability to channel his vitriol into nuanced, if vulgar, jabs at the regime. Whereas before Essam might hint at taking violent action against the state through imagery of Molotov cocktails or nooses, here he uses vulgarity to harm the president in a rhetorical way that hits far closer to home than simply calling him a violent criminal. By adopting this rhetorical evolution of the violent lyrical attacks in his music, Essam's attacks on Sisi are no longer just political, they are personal.

A second example of Essam's nuanced lyrical references in "Balaha" comes from the song's title itself. As was stated before, "balaha" also means dates and by using this nickname Essam is able to lambast Sisi and his policies without ever actually mentioning his name or showing his face. This draws a direct parallel to Egyptian protest songs of earlier decades where political leaders such as Saad Zaghloul were referred to in songs and speech by code in order to avoid the wrath of British censors.<sup>227</sup> Curiously, the code words used to refer to Saad Zaghloul were often of zaghloul dates or "balah zaghloul."<sup>228</sup> The reoccurrence of the same political code word across decades and political contexts to avoid censorship is almost uncanny and Essam makes skillful use of it here to deliver biting satire and provide plausible deniability using the same methods used by Egyptian protest music long before him. A song featuring such a play on words was even written by ubiquitous Egyptian political songwriter

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<sup>227</sup> Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 150.

<sup>228</sup> Ziad Fahmy, *Ordinary Egyptians*, 162.

Sayed Darwish, whom Essam would perform songs by in the early days of the Tahrir Square protests.<sup>229</sup> Placed in context of his known appreciation for the music of Sayed Darwish, Essam shows that he still carries the themes of Darwish close to him even this far into his career. Invoking Egypt's past is nothing new to Essam and in Balaha he evolves his use of references to Egypt's history of political protest to be more multifaceted than ever. Indeed, by drawing on so many Egyptian historical and cultural touchstones in this video, Essam creates an aura of cultural authority, especially compared to Sisi who is portrayed as a eunuch who has sold out Egypt and its past.

Essam's greater cultural authority is also matched with a greater sense of masculinity. In contrast to the emasculated version of Sisi that is presented in the song, Essam is handsome, confident, energetic, and clever. It is not unheard for Essam to create masculine dichotomies in his texts as he has done so before in "Mahnash Mn Dol." Once again in "Balaha," Essam holds his masculinity in comparison to an emasculated other in order to strengthen his own position. Furthermore, Essam's supposedly superior masculinity and cultural authority combine in a way that potentially displaces Sisi's place as Egypt's leader within the imagined space of political legitimacy. According to the song, Essam has a deep knowledge and appreciation of Egyptian culture and history, whereas Sisi is portrayed to have neither. Where Sisi is portrayed as castrated, Essam appears virile in comparison. Indeed, when considering the roles masculinity has

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<sup>229</sup> "Songs for Tahrir", Jan. 18, 2012, in BBC Sounds, produced by BBC, 07:30, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b019fxjf>.

conventionally played throughout history in the legitimacy of rulership, the way in which Essam deconstructs Sisi's supposed credentials to lead Egypt is almost oedipal. In previous videos, Essam has billed himself as "The voice of Egypt" when such statements were highly debatable. But in "Balaha," Essam's clever use of cultural signaling and satire in comparison to Sisi show a solid attempt to figuratively usurp such a title from the president.

However, as potent as the themes and wordplay of the video are, one element of "Balaha" sticks out like a sore thumb, the background. The background in which he performs all his dances and delivers his satire is rather peculiar, it appears to be a run of the mill American suburb in the fall. Indeed, by observing flags in the background later in the video, it becomes obvious that the video was filmed in Arkansas.<sup>230</sup> The video was filmed when Essam made a trip to the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville where he met with noted academic of Egyptian popular music Ted Swedenburg and subsequently filmed the video.<sup>231</sup> Essam's exile from Egypt is well known and it is expected that most if not any music video he is in will not be filmed in Egypt. However, his filming of a video that attempts to make such a major statement against Sisi, and by extension for himself, cannot help but be undercut by the fact that he has to film this video thousands of miles away from Egypt. Indeed, if one were to apply the same symbolism found in Essam's video to his situation in real life, it is he who is

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<sup>230</sup> Ramy Essam, "Balaha," 01:28.

<sup>231</sup> Sean Clancy, "PAPER TRAILS: Egyptian's video role a heavy toll," Arkansas Democrat Gazette, Arkansas Democrat-Gazette Inc., May 17, 2020, <https://www.arkansasonline.com/news/2020/may/17/egyptian-s-video-role-a-heavy-toll-2020/?news-arkansas>.

figuratively cuckolded by the Sisi regime away from his home country and the publishing of a song in response seems rather impotent. Perhaps it is this limitation that forced Essam to evolve his rhetorical style into such a stinging piece of satire. But whatever the case, the impact of “Balaha” was anything but immaterial.

Less than a month after the video’s release, director and lead editor of the video Shady Habash, along with several others involved in the making of the video, were arrested and imprisoned in Egypt. Habash remained in prison until May 2020 when he succumbed to illness and died.<sup>232</sup> This turn of events adds further complexity to the enduring meaning of “Balaha.” On one hand, the prompting of such a drastic reprisal by the Egyptian government for the publishing of music video could be seen as evidence that the criticisms within it were just that potent and true that it baited the Egyptian state into acting against it. Such a response to something as simple as a song would also validate the way Essam mocked the regime in the song for reflexively banning a child’s toy due to a vulgar nickname. But on the other hand, it could be understood as Essam making provocative statements far away from Egypt in the safe company of friendly academics while his friends and colleagues still in Egypt suffer the consequences for it, a mark against Essam’s usually masculine and combative public image. What is certain is that “Balaha” was a tipping point that triggered a response from the Sisi regime. Essam incurred this wrath before when he

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<sup>232</sup> Declan Walsh, “Filmmaker who Mocked Egypt’s President Dies in Prison,” The New York Times, The New York Times Company, May 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/02/world/middleeast/egypt-shady-habash-dead-sisi.html>.

released “Mahnash Mn Dol,” a video that also exalted Essam’s masculinity and his self-association with broader Egyptian culture before he was forced into exile. However, there exists no solid evidence that Essam’s exile was the result of “Mahnash Mn Dol” itself or the cumulative result of his activism. Whether or not there is an actual common theme within Essam’s texts that precede reprisal from the Egyptian state, the combination of inflammatory satire and vulgar yet nuanced lyricism of “Balaha” led to a chain of events that will forever define Essam’s career as a political musician.

While this drama was playing out, Cairokee continued on their own musical evolution. After their wildly successful studio series, Cairokee released another music video in early 2019, “Kan Lak Ma’aya” (You Have Lived with Me...), named for the Umm Kulthum song sampled within it.<sup>233</sup> In the opening frame, the band are playing on a sound stage with a glowing white background behind them, the kind ubiquitous in many modern music videos.<sup>234</sup> Yellow, grammatically so-so Japanese subtitles line the bottom of the screen.<sup>235</sup> The video immediately begins with Amir Eid singing:

“Lots of sweet words but no brains

They sing and cheer but the meaning does not stick

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<sup>233</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - Kan Lak Ma’aya كان لك معايا - كايروكي,” Youtube, Google, Mar. 21, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixeWiRGspM0&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixeWiRGspM0&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial); Umm Kulthum - ام كلثوم, “Umm Kulthum - Kan Lak Maaya - Rare Recording | تسجيل - كان لك معايا - نادر,” Youtube, Google, Dec. 30, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HK4JosXJss&ab\\_channel=UmmKulthum-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%83%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%85](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HK4JosXJss&ab_channel=UmmKulthum-%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%83%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D9%85).

<sup>234</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - Kan Lak Ma’aya كان لك معايا - كايروكي,” Mar. 21, 2019, 00:10, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixeWiRGspM0&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixeWiRGspM0&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial); “Stage Lighting and Music Video Lighting,” SoFlo Studio, SoFlo Studio, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://www.soflostudio.com/stage-lighting-and-music-video-lighting>.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

Stars far away from you tell you how to live  
Your tragedy is their opportunity  
One says: "Dream! Be optimistic! Hope that tomorrow will be better.  
Don't give up, keep going forward, its easy  
You are strong, you can do it, the world is good, write a song"  
Make money, collect views, dream, and ignore the nightmare  
They sell you air, they put poison in the medicine  
You are alone, they are together, stars far away in the sky  
Looking upon you from above, hungry for fame, money, and lights  
They give you a million hints, an offer you can't refuse  
They give you a million hints, solutions for all your problems  
Bait is set for you on a hook, you bite, you're reeled in, you're eaten over a  
song or commercial  
The direction my friend, is normal  
Sixty years pass, Life passes by  
They still say "Tomorrow will be better  
Oh brother why are you sad?"<sup>236</sup>

Next begins Umm Kulthum's chorus, which has been remixed and chopped up, the band members step back while the stage darkens leaving only a few columns of light:

"You have lived with me the most beautiful story of all time  
You have lived... You have lived... You have lived...  
...of all time."<sup>237</sup>

The lights come on and the next verse begins:

"Hope in their mouth is like chewed up gum  
Everything is a scam, telling the "truth" became annoying,  
They want you always a prisoner, your mind is the cage  
Annoying like the flies, they go buzz buzz buzz  
Woke you from the best sleep, "Up! Let's go! Dream!"

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<sup>236</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Kan Lak Ma'aya," 00:10-01:02; Combined translation.

<sup>237</sup> CairokeeOfficial, "Kan Lak Ma'aya," 01:04-01:32; Combined translation.

“Don’t overthink it, hold yourself together  
Be optimistic, don’t think about sorrow”  
Your miserable life is their lunch  
They eat your bold and excited dreams  
You’re a morsel, you’re eaten, you’re silent  
Knowing is a crime, to succeed, you need to be a loser  
Your art should be kitsch, your voice stays faint or unheard  
Even if you draw a thousand doors on the wall  
The wall is still a wall, and the doors drawings  
Even if you lay out another bright way  
What does the light mean when the light is a mirage?  
They wrote on your grave: “He was a good man, he lived and died  
quietly.”<sup>238</sup>

Just before Eid delivers this last line, the music cuts, leaving only his voice.<sup>239</sup>

The Umm Kulthum sample returns, now heavily distorted as if a cassette tape were failing: “Years passed like seconds in your love.”<sup>240</sup>

The video reprises both the lyrical and visual themes present in “as-Sekka Shmal Fi Shmal.” There is no imagery aside from the band performing and, in this instance, it is even more stark as they are performing in front of a blank screen instead of recording studio, allowing for only the stage lights to accentuate moments of importance. However, the ubiquity of this sort of minimalist background in the global canon of popular music videos increases the video’s contemporary pop feel. Indeed, the video borrows other tropes from contemporary popular musicians such as their use of sloppily translated subtitles

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<sup>238</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Kan Lak Ma’aya,” 01:45-03:21; Combined translation.

<sup>239</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Kan Lak Ma’aya,” 03:18-03:21.

<sup>240</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Kan Lak Ma’aya,” 03:21-03:38; Combined translation.

in a foreign script.<sup>241</sup> In this, it appears that Cairokee is continuing their drift away from their old use of explicit imagery, political or otherwise, in their videos. This increasing level of visual vagueness in their art adds further credence to the idea that these stylistic changes are a function of Cairokee self-censoring themselves to continue putting out their message in heavily censored Egypt. Their self-censorship in this case seems to have evolved from simply removing visual text to camouflaging themselves by enmeshing their style in the similarly minimalistic visual language of global popular music. This inversion is remarkably similar to the tactic attributed to the “low ones” in “as-Sekka Shmal Fi Shmal” where they change their appearance to prey on honest people. However, this same tactic is now being used by Cairokee to continue the public accessibility of their music and as they pointed out in their previous song, one must play the “low ones” game of social camouflage if they are to win.

Lyrically, the song continues the theme of emphatically describing the social woes they find in their society. In this case, their target is the tendency of people to idolize celebrities and other successful people who have nothing to do with them. They also attack blind positivity, eschewing any direct mentions of even the word politics. Eid describes the words of these idols as sounding good but having no substance, of setting false expectations for success, and finally of being a trick designed to take advantage of those who idolize them by taking advantage of their insecurities. Eid further sings about how that ultimately the

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<sup>241</sup> Lil Uzi Vert, “Lil Uzi Vert - XO Tour Llif3 (Official Music Video),” Youtube, Google, Sep. 4, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WrsFXgQk5UI&ab>.

things people tell each other to assure themselves that things will one day be better are empty promises, even fatally empty. Once again, a feigned desirability is used by successful people to prey on those who are honest and vulnerable, and the possibility of solutions is as bleak as in “as-Sekka Shmal Fi Shmal.” This keys in the audience to the fact that though Cairokee are not directly addressing any specific institution or group of people, they are still addressing the same antagonists that have been present throughout their lyrical canon. In this they match their developments in visual style by abandoning identifiable lyrical targets and using thematic hints to continue their message in spite of Egypt’s high levels of censorship.

Unfounded positivity and idealism are criticized in the lyrics through conversations Eid has with himself and another imaginary figure in the lyrics. These conversations involve this other figure naively encouraging Eid in a way that skirts around the heart of the issues put forth in the lyrics. Indeed, it is more like this other figure is talking at Eid rather than with him, just as the father in the “skenshizer” commercial talked to his son that Cairokee found so compelling in their “Akher Oghneya” video. But from the personal way this other figure addresses Eid, with words such as “brother,” the audience gets the sense that this figure may not necessarily be the “far away stars” that are the antagonist of this video, but rather someone closer to them. The naïve positivity and idealism this other figure espouses bear a marked similarity to some of Cairokee’s past lyrics; an emphasis on a bright/better tomorrow and encouraging assertions of strength that don’t align with reality. These, in addition to the suggestion of

“writing a song” as a solution to the deep unhappiness that one feels with society, make it feel that the figure having this conversation with Cairokee is at least in part a reflection of their younger selves. Furthermore, if we are to consider how people participate in idolization of “stars far away from you” in the modern context, we are led to social media and communication technology. Eid identifies the constant messaging he receives from “them” as annoying as the buzzing of flies. But this buzzing that Eid refers to is also evocative of the buzzing that a cellphone produces. Communication technology was already retroactively criticized by Cairokee in “Akher Oghneya,” so it fits here that Eid’s lyrics would construe cellphone notifications, at one point an example of pride and accomplishment in Cairokee’s “Ya el-Medan” video, as a nuisance and bearer of content that is more harmful than helpful. From these two reflections, it is demonstrated that even if Cairokee rail against such naïve idealism now, there is a subtle admission of their own role in contributing to it in the past.

But perhaps the most significant element of “Kan Lak Ma’aya” is in its use of its namesake, the Um Kulthum song that bears the same name. In the video, the remixed signature verse of the classic song takes the place of a chorus. As stated before, the band adds emphasis to this chorus by manipulating what little visual presence they still have, shutting off the main lights so that the audience is compelled to focus on the impact of the remixed lyrics. On its own, the lyrics of this portion of Um Kulthum’s “Kan Lak Ma’aya” evoke a sense of nostalgia and a remembrance of good times that have now come to pass. When the line is cut up in the remix it almost sounds like Um Kulthum is struggling to say the lyrics, as if

the memory itself has begun to fade and become difficult to recall in song. This effect is intensified at the end of the song where the words “Years passed like seconds in your love” are so heavily distorted it may be difficult at first to discern what they are. This line also plays into the previous line in the song “sixty years pass, your life passes you by;” demonstrating that while one occupies themselves with unachievable goals and petty excuses, life will pass by just as quickly as it would if one were living a more fulfilling life. The solution to this dilemma is not clear in the song but through its pathos, it compels its audience to strive for some sort of clarity in their lives and to stop with excuses and distractions from what is truly making them unhappy.

Beyond simply having an emphatic effect on the lyrics of the song, the sampling of Um Kulthum here demonstrates another evolution of Cairokee’s “quiet politics” of implicit political messaging. Considering Cairokee’s history of musical protest and activism, it is not unreasonable to suggest that a potential solution to the problems Cairokee describes here would be wide-ranging political, social, and economic changes incompatible with the current regime. But due to the necessity of not being exiled or thrown in prison, subtler methods have to be used to convey this message. Cairokee seem to have overcome this dilemma by taking a page from Ramy Essam’s rhetorical toolbox in the use of a song with a storied cultural history in Egypt. Like “Balaha,” “Kan Lak Ma’aya” and Um Kulthum in general are quite likely to evoke a strong personal and cultural response from Egyptians. That was indeed the case as when the song was released, it garnered considerable media attention for reimagining the classic Um

Kulthum hit, though not always positively.<sup>242</sup> But regardless, Cairokee is able to enhance their message about the necessity of societal change by using the established meaning of Um Kulthum's music to fill in the gaps of their vocabulary that have otherwise been censored.

This is however where Cairokee's use of historic songs differs from Essam's. Whereas Ramy Essam used a song convention that is commonly associated with subversive political protest to enhance the strength of his song, Cairokee uses an artist whose popularity transcends political preferences. Indeed, Um Kulthum's popularity in the past has been used by others such as Nasser to piggyback political messages off of that differ markedly from Cairokee's.<sup>243</sup> Because after all, even if the diminished way Cairokee talked about politics in "as-Sekka Shmal fi Shmal" became censored one day and indeed how Essam's use of political musical reference already has been, what regime could possibly decide to censor Um Kulthum? Ultimately, Cairokee's use of all these subtle rhetorical devices in this song combined with the reflection on their past themes demonstrate just how much Cairokee as a group have evolved in response to the turbulent course of Egyptian politics since the revolution.

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<sup>242</sup> Cairo 360, "Cairokee's Newest Album Is Shattering the Region's Music Charts!" Cairo 360, Media Republic, Apr. 10, 2019, <https://www.cairo360.com/article/music/cairokees-newest-album-is-shattering-the-regions-music-charts/>.

<sup>243</sup> Shirin Neshat, "Voice of Egypt: Shirin Neshat on Umm Kulthum," Creative Time Reports, Creative Time, Inc., Nov. 18, 2013, <https://creativetimereports.org/2013/11/18/the-voice-of-egypt-shirin-neshat-on-umm-kulthum/#:~:text=A%20number%20of%20people%20criticized,well%20as%20her%20charity%20work.>

## Conclusions

It has been one year since the passing of Shady Habash as of the time of this writing. In that time, both Ramy Essam and Cairokee have reflected on his life and their work with him. Essam released a song entitled “Prison Doesn’t Kill/The Last Letter of Shady Habash” two weeks after his death that incorporated his last known correspondence to the outside world and was originally intended to be part of a public campaign pressuring for his release.<sup>244</sup> Likewise, Habash had been a frequent creative collaborator with Cairokee and Amir Eid took to Twitter to express his grief at his partner’s passing.<sup>245</sup> While Habash did not come into this study until the tail end of it, he was a constant force in the production and promotion of both of the subject artists’ music throughout many stages of their careers. Like a link being severed, his death subsequently sees Ramy Essam and Cairokee continue to drift their respective ways in regard to their music and messaging in the tumultuous setting of Sisi’s Egypt.

Examples of this drift can be seen in the artists’ current output, such as in Essam’s late 2020 release of the somber acoustic “El Amiis El Karoo” (The Flannel Shirt) about imprisoned poet Galal el-Behairy who also collaborated with Essam on “Balaha.”<sup>246</sup> These two songs demonstrate that even if it is argued that

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<sup>244</sup> Ramy Essam, “Prison Doesn’t Kill / The Last Letter of Shady Habash | السجن مابيموتش / رسالة شادي | حبش الأخيرة,” Youtube, Google, May 16, 2020,

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP02WXqq\\_2k&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pP02WXqq_2k&ab_channel=RamyEssam).

<sup>245</sup> Cairokee, “Credits go to Shady Habash,, Thank You!” Facebook, Facebook, Feb. 28, 2014,

[<https://twitter.com/AmirEid/status/1256577250046226432>.](https://www.facebook.com/75054000936/photos/10152238138370937/?type=3; @AmirEid, “ربنا يرحمك يا شادي يا حبشي ويصبر اهلك واحبابك,” Twitter, Twitter Inc., May 2, 2020,</a></p></div><div data-bbox=)

<sup>246</sup> Ramy Essam, “Ramy Essam – El Amiis El Karoo (The Flannel Shirt) | القميص الكاروه | رامى عصام – القميص الكاروه | #FreeGalal,” Youtube, Google, Nov. 26, 2020,

Essam's practices as an artist endanger his peers in Egypt, he is acutely aware of their plight, with the majority of his released music since "Balaha" being dedicated to raising awareness of the issue. Furthermore, his next release, an interpretation of the poem "Ya Habayebna" (Oh You Loved Ones) by the oft imprisoned poet Ahmed Fouad Negm, carries on in Essam's tradition of paying homage to the legacy of Egypt's activist artists.<sup>247</sup> Indeed, in the fallout of Habash's death, Essam seems determined to stick with his established identity as someone who will directly confront the messy and dangerous topic of politics in his music. Something that has changed in these songs, however, is how Essam channels his characteristic anger. No longer flashy and loud, it manifests in the off kilter vocal delivery and almost industrial sounding instrumentals of "Ya Habayebna" and "Prison Doesn't Kill," a shift in tone reminiscent of the sobering sound of "Ah Ya Balad" after he was first exiled from Egypt. The fallout of "Balaha" seems to have tempered the way Essam expresses his anger through music, and while it is unclear if the aggressive Essam will return, he seems set on directly confronting the issues of political oppression in Egypt and doing what he can to advocate for those who paid the price for helping him do this.

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[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfEdO2Ga9cE&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tfEdO2Ga9cE&ab_channel=RamyEssam); "Galal el-Behairy," Pen America, PEN America, Jan. 24, 2019, <https://pen.org/advocacy-case/galal-el-behairy/>.  
<sup>247</sup> Ramy Essam, "Ramy Essam – Ya Habayebna (Oh You Loved Ones) | يا حبايبنا - رامي عصام," Youtube, Google, Dec. 10, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJh2RplKcP8&ab\\_channel=RamyEssam](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJh2RplKcP8&ab_channel=RamyEssam); Matthew Kyte, "Ahmed Fouad Negm: The Revolutionary Poet of the People," Culture Trip, The Culture Trip Ltd., Dec. 14, 2016, <https://theculturetrip.com/africa/egypt/articles/ahmed-fouad-negm-the-revolutionary-egyptian-poet-of-the-people/>.

Cairokee meanwhile recently released their latest song “Samurai” which continues their journey through the world of contemporary pop aesthetics.<sup>248</sup> The song is sponsored and features direct references to the rideshare company Uber while the video itself is draped in the neon color pallet and Japanese imagery that is commonly seen in the music videos of many current artists.<sup>249</sup> Despite its flashy and commercial exterior, its lyrics about being a wandering samurai facing an uncertain world hint at a further metaphorical meaning, as would be expected at this point. With this, Cairokee seems to be diving further into their commercial camouflage, only their evocative lyrics hinting at deeper social readings of the song. But perhaps one of the most striking examples of Cairokee’s departure from their formerly politically inflammatory public image in this timeframe is the disappearance of the original “Akher Oghneya” music video from Cairokee’s official Youtube channel. The Wayback Machine archives seem to indicate it was made private sometime in November 2020, with the old URL leading to a dead page.<sup>250</sup> The only version of the original video still available is one uploaded on a third party’s channel.<sup>251</sup> Though interestingly enough, a version of “Akher

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<sup>248</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - Samurai كايروكي – ساموراي,” Youtube, Google, Mar. 19, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnZfPPiivwk&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnZfPPiivwk&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial); Ian Nordin, “Vaporwave Might be Dead, But its Ghost Continues to Haunt Pop Music,” Study Breaks, Study Breaks, Mar. 20, 2020, <https://studybreaks.com/culture/music/vaporwave-ghost-influence/>.

<sup>249</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - Samurai كايروكي – ساموراي,” Youtube, Google, Mar. 19, 2021, 00:01, 00:43, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnZfPPiivwk&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cnZfPPiivwk&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial).

<sup>250</sup> “https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZu2euuj2GE,” Wayback Machine, Internet Archive, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, [https://web.archive.org/web/20200315000000\\*/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZu2euuj2GE](https://web.archive.org/web/20200315000000*/https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZu2euuj2GE;); “Video Unavailable,” Youtube, Google, Accessed Mar. 31, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TZu2euuj2GE>.

<sup>251</sup> Omar Mostafa, “آخر أغنية - كايروكي - Cairokee - Akher Oghneya,” Youtube, Google, Mar. 27, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slag5-t5nYA&ab\\_channel=OmarMostafa](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Slag5-t5nYA&ab_channel=OmarMostafa).

Oghneya” from the “as-Sekka Shmal Fi Shmal” studio series is still available.<sup>252</sup> It is curious that the video this study identified as the turning point for Cairokee’s identity as a political band was deleted and the only official version left is one that sports their new minimalized visual aesthetic, as if they are wrapping up the loose ends of their old identity.

Beyond the different points in their careers that we see Ramy Essam and Cairokee at following the death of Shady Habash, it is clear from the breadth of this study that these artists have long been on different trajectories as they traveled through the course of the Egyptian revolution. But what truly set these two artists who came up into the same environment of Tahrir Square with similar sounds and themes on these diverging paths?

In the opinion of the author of this study, the most likely explanation based on the observed evidence in the lives and texts of the artists seems to be one of their social class. The topic of social class has played a prominent role in many of the academic studies on the subject up to this point, but rarely has it been contrasted between the two, especially over this long a period of study. Indeed, the shifting pressures of the Egyptian revolution forced Ramy Essam and Cairokee to constantly reshape themselves as they were confronted by the reaction to the revolution. How they were reshaped by this process seems to have been substantially influenced by the background of their social class. Cairokee’s middle class upbringing allowed for them to retreat into online spaces

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<sup>252</sup> CairokeeOfficial, “Cairokee - The Last Song / آخر أغنية - كايروكي,” Youtube, Google, July 10, 2017, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kH3l\\_4oFVI&ab\\_channel=CairokeeOfficial](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6kH3l_4oFVI&ab_channel=CairokeeOfficial).

and commercially camouflage themselves when they lost access to the former physical spaces of the revolution, both because those spaces ceased to exist and because they had seemingly lost track of the feelings of “the street.” Furthermore, their more accessible musical style allowed them to gradually remold their image into an inoffensive one that belies the continued social and political messaging in their music, at least enough to avoid being imprisoned. Essam on the other hand came from a decidedly more working-class background with a personality and musical style that was more subversive. This combativeness persisted through attempts by Essam to match the safer style of Cairokee, especially when tragedy befell his friends in the largely working class al-Ahly football club at Port Said. As we have discussed, his combative image and behavior would eventually lead to Essam’s exile from Egypt. However, his time spent reflecting the Egyptian revolution from a more working-class perspective, or at least a gritty approximation of one, allowed him to find a willing support network of foreign NGOs and academics to support him in continuing his music. Thus, while both Cairokee and Ramy Essam have made it through the fraught ten years since the start of the Egyptian revolution and are still releasing music, each artist faced and found solutions to travails in ways that derived from the respective social classes in which they originated.

It was stated at the beginning of this study that it is hoped that it will serve as a basis for further comparative studies of the art of the Egyptian Revolution, but that is not the only thing this study wishes to introduce into the academic discourse on the topic. Through all the discussion there has been on how the

artists responded to different situations and what influenced them to act in the way they did, the role that academia plays in shaping these decisions has been severely understudied. This question is especially relevant when looking at the case of Ramy Essam and the fallout from “Balaha.” This study has already examined the possibility that Essam could be criticized for how he handled his leading role in “Balaha” as he was relatively safe in exile while at least one of his colleagues in Egypt has paid the ultimate price for their involvement in the project. While this study has ultimately determined that Essam’s actions post-“Balaha” have demonstrated his cognizance and effort towards helping those harmed by the video’s release, it is the opinion of the author of this study that it is inappropriate to ask such questions without also examining the role academia played in the “Balaha” saga and the influence it has in the post-Tahrir music world more broadly. Indeed, would the fallout from “Balaha” have been possible if Ted Swedenburg had not been there to help facilitate its production by hosting Essam in Arkansas? Is it right for academics to have the ability to criticize artists they may have influence over without also examining that influence? Seeing how a range of academics have been following and interacting with these artists since they rose to prominence, it is worth interrogating the role they play both in the lives of the artists and even in the art they create.

By raising this question, this study hopes that in addition to laying a framework by which new studies of the past decade of post-Tahrir art can be examined, it is hoped that it has also posed questions that will shape the understanding of the next decade of said art. New frameworks will have to be

constructed and assumptions challenged as the effects of the Arab Spring's legacy continue to ripple out through the lives of those who experienced it and this study has been an attempt to do just that. Where this next decade will lead Egypt is uncertain, but regardless, artists such as Cairokee and Ramy Essam will be there to both reflect and participate in this process, evolving along with it as they always have done.

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