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What Do Egypt's Youth Want?

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Distinctly Catholic

If you work at the Mideast desk at the State Department, one of the most useful pieces of information to know would be the attitudes of young Egyptians. The revolution that toppled longtime dictator Hosni Mubarak has produced a fast-changing political climate in which the long-term problems afflicting the society are not susceptible to quick solutions, but revolutions produce expectations in abundance. In the event, a professor at Catholic University, Jim Youniss, who is also a fellow at the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies where he gave a presentation on his research at one of our regular brown bag lunches, has been working with two Catholic University students to answer the question: What do the young people of Egypt want?

Youniss has long studied what motivates young people to become politically engaged. When the revolution broke out in Egypt, his colleague Brian Barber, flew to Cairo and began interviewing young people. Youniss and his assistants, Trevor Falk and Catherine Noga, have spent the last year pouring through hundreds of pages of interview transcripts, focusing especially on six young people in Cairo, examining the websites the young people referred to in the interviews, visiting Facebook sites, and trying to find an answer to the question: What do the young people want? Now, in conjunction with Egypt's Population Council and some Egyptian university professors, Youniss and his team are participating in a survey of more than 10,000 Egyptian youth, aged 14-34. Soon they will follow with a survey of 500 young activists.

"I did not expect to view the people at such a deep level, and the impact the idea of democracy can have on people," Ms. Noga told me during a recent interview. "We take it for granted. They will do almost anything to get it. It even changes their personality, their actions." Falk agreed: "A lot of revolutionaries

and activists get so involved, they start to become outcasts. They think they're the ones truly fighting for what the country needs. They tend to view others as complacent.

Young people like Noga and Falk are essential to navigating the web, where much of the revolution was in Egypt was made. "Facebook did not cause the revolution," Noga says. "Activists caused it. But, it was an essential tool." Falk recalled being told by the six young activists that their website showed what was really happening in the country, with often graphic videos of police beatings, the utter falsity of the government's claims was exposed. "The protests were really violent," says Noga. "The U.S. media didn't really communicate that." "You hear about three or four people being killed," adds Falk. "But when you see someone beaten with steel clubs, you understand the source of anger."

One of the most important internet sites was "We are all Khaled Said," named for a young man who died in police custody in June 2010. Here is a link to that page. As well videos ran across the internet ether like wildfire, bringing the long simmering resentments of the regime to the fore. Then, in an effort to stop the revolution, the government tried shutting down the internet. This had the unintended effect of driving people, in the flesh, to Tahrir Square and Mubarak's days were numbered.

"It was groundbreaking for them to be able to say, 'I don't like Mubarak,'" Falk points out. The virtual universe of the internet made it easier, but once the habit took, it was hard to break. The original Facebook page set up for Egyptian protesters has now become a place for airing all sorts of grievances. Recently, it was even used by Syrian activists trying to topple the dictator in their country.

Noga and Falk vie with each other in heaping praise on Professor Youniss. He's been a great mentor," says Noga. "We put in quite a lot of work, and he treats us like equals, not a peer, but as a human being." The professor returns the compliments. "These students represent the very best of CUA students who are serious about learning and doing significant things for society and the world."

Falk, who came to Catholic University on a baseball scholarship, graduated last Saturday with a degree in philosophy. This autumn, he will continue his studies at George Mason University in Northern Virginia. He intends to continue focusing on studying conflict analysis. Noga will be returning to Catholic University in the fall to finish her degree in Psychology. Professor Youniss is right. Interviewing them, it was hard not to feel hopeful about the next generation. At least the one here. We will know more about the hopes and fears of the next generation of young Egyptians in the next few months as the polling data gets sifted by Professor Youniss and his team

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