

Basem Fathy - "April 6th Youth Movement - Nonviolence as a Strategy for Change"

It was on 28th of June 2008. And here Ahmed Maher told me that I don't know what you're going to say, but I'm going to give you 15 minutes to say anything that might help as an ideology strategy for what we're going to do. And it wasn't clear at all. I mean we just have the passion, and we want to do something. So he told me, I'm going to give you, on the conference day I'm going to give you 15 minutes to say whatever you want, and I trust you. I didn't know what to say and I started to search the internet, what should I say? And here it was, the first time to read about the non-violence and how it could be a strategy for facing the oppression. And again, I told you that I have a scientific background, I did chemistry, and I have this kind of methodology of thinking about society and human, from a scientific approach. That's why I used all my knowledge in chemistry and physics and mathematics with all what I read about politics and society and all of this and I merged them together, and I found them close in the way of thinking and the non-violence actions against oppression. And I just showed all of this in a 15 minute presentation, and they decided that I'm going to be a leader for the movement. It was the start, the start it was like this. And since then we didn't have a lot of time and we got the first arrest and detention on 23rd of July 2008, less than one month of founding the movement officially. And this was extremely helpful for the movement and for ourselves, and for me myself, for having such experience. Even here on this experience, we got detained for eight days, sent to the prison, got beaten of course in the beginning while we were arrested. Okay, first, I was thinking about the philosophy and the philosophy of all the change, the philosophy of the actions and interactions. And the philosophy of accumulation of something to have a qualitative change, which is scientific law again. So its many ideas, I even cannot remember a lot now, but I was thinking in this way on the philosophy first, then getting as much as I can from the science of non-violent change, or non-violent conflict, if I may say. And I found it a good way. We're facing a state that is having the monopoly of violence-- having arms, having prisons, having everything-- and we have nothing. So let's use this to be our weapon against them. So I found this great. I learned at this time that we have to be very public, nothing secret, and this was a great strategy, just to tell about everything we're going to do. This was one of the concepts of the non-violence, to tell the people that you have the ability to do this and I'm not an alien, I'm just an Egyptian person, and I'm doing something then you can do it as well. So that's one of the concepts. And it had a great deal with standing against the surveillance. You know the police, the secret police and the intelligence and all of this; they have very traditional methodology of monitoring you or making surveillance on what you're doing. Simply you're publicizing what you're doing, nothing is secret. So you're simply defusing; they have nothing to do with you. And even I've been told by a state security officer later when I've been arrested,

of course he knew me and he told me, "You're Basem Fathy." I told him yes. He told me that, "You're spoiling all our work because you're publicizing everything on the Facebook. You don't have secrets, and we don't know how to deal with you." So this was one of the things. On the other hand, thinking about how to organize the group, how to market our ideas to recruit more people and after recruiting those people, how to organize them. In the beginning, for five months or something, I was thinking mainly how to reach the poor and marginalized people and how to connect our work with them. Then later I started to think in a different way that we have 60% of our population are young people, youth, and like half of them are using the internet and being online, which is enough critical mass for doing a change. And this was very important to think about, ok, to have a goal or a target audience if I may say to work with them, and this worked well. So I was thinking all the time again about marketing our ideas, recruiting more people, organizing those people, keeping away from being arrested or killed or whatever. So this was the ideas. The political party, it was totally corrupt, managed by the regime. The newspapers and the media tools, they were totally closed. Even the mosques and the church, it was helping the ideas of the regime. Actually the regime in Egypt it's not ideological, it wasn't ideological; it was just some interests. But I mean, again they are trying, the leaders of Islam and of Christianity, they were pushing the ideas of that we have to obey and we shouldn't resist, which was one of the very clear differences between the environment in Egypt and the other countries. In the other countries in Eastern Europe and Latin America, and the United States, the churches were playing a different tool for pushing the people to resist and to stand and to make a change. It was opposite situation in Egypt. So all the very ordinary channels for doing what we were doing, they were totally closed. So we were thinking how can we pass from this very narrow hole? The internet? Talking to the people, according to their own cultures because again, we have a culture for 7,000 years of that we have to obey doing politics. Doing political activities or standing against the ruler is a very harmful activity in the Egyptian culture. So how can we change this culture? Maybe sometimes by making shocks, by mocking, or even insulting the presidents and all these figures that the people believe are holy and should be untouchable. And sometimes by getting to the Egyptian culture, like celebrating the Egyptian Love Day or celebrating, commemorating the Revolution of 1952, July 1952. And this was the day that we were arrested on.

Basem Fathy – “April 6th Youth Movement”

This was in March and April 2008; this was the start in a totally different stage in my life. Here I felt that I have enough knowledge, I finished my study, and I am ready and I am responsible for myself and I can start. And the third thing, that I shouldn't be afraid anymore. No time for this-- no time for being scared. This was in 2008 and it was, it was a big event when the workers of Mahalla town, which is a town in the north of Egypt, decided to make a workers' strike. Then the political forces, the opposition political forces decided to make a call for a general strike in the country. It wasn't the first time to have such cause, whether for worker strike or general strike, but it was the first effective one because of a group of young people who were a loose network decided to have this cause and to spread it over the internet using the social media. Blogs, Facebook, Twitter -- all of this. I was one of those. We didn't sit to organize. We have group of this network, they were connecting, they were the remnants of the last activism wave that happened in 2004-2006. Here was a youth movement that I want part of, but I was participating in the victory like I've mentioned. But in 2008 these groups decided to have this call of the general strike and to put it on the internet and to spread it on the internet and on the street. And the tactics that were used, it was very easy and very de-centralized, just putting maybe a leaflet or something, a leaflet design on the internet and asking the people who are interested to print it and spread it in the street. And that's why it was very successful. I was part of this-- writing, writing; reading; connecting to people and telling my circles who are offline, out of the internet; spreading some of these leaflets for calling for the day of April 6, 2008. And here I started to get rid of my fear. But yet I was individual, and even on the day I went to the place of the protest alone and I find nothing to do. And I just went back home. On the same day, I was kind of disappointed. Of course I didn't see the whole image and I wasn't mature enough to see how valuable this step for the change in Egypt. That's why I was kind of disappointed. And when I came back to home I went back again to the Facebook, to the internet and I started to elect some people who I feel they are writing valuable stuff and to message them and to tell them we have to do something. I don't know them, but I had this courage to, just to reach out to people I don't know and ask them that we have to organize something. Of course, like 99% of them, they thought that I am an agent for the security or something and trying to drag them-- but later I succeeded to get in contact to a group of them, and to talk about how could we start to organize a youth movement that will make the change. Now this storage or reservoir of thoughts and experiences that had been in the history again, and this was the importance of the knowledge that I was accumulating for years before; in each single experience of struggle or resistance in the history, the people won. So I hear this, I believe that we have to start to win. That's it, it's that easy. Just to start, if you want a change, just to start and you're going to win at the end. Even if not in your generation, but I

mean those who will come after you, they will do it and they will win. Again, this is the experience of history. And here I say yes, we have to start, and once we're starting we're going to get to a winning end. From the people that I was connecting over the internet, I connected with some common friends with Ahmed Maher, the, now he is the coordinator, the general coordinator of April 6th and he's the main founder of the movement, and he was the birth, he was a part of Kefaya Movement and the other youth movement that appeared before in 2005, 2006. And he was having such dream of building a very huge movement that will witness the change -- that will make the change. Not only to be a step towards this change. So he was having such a dream, and I was, I didn't have the same experience at this time but I believed that I was having enough knowledge and I was passionate for the same thing, for building this youth movement. We met for the first time-- this was the real story. Simply, in the first meeting, he told me that you're going to do all the intellectual work of the movement, just put the strategies, go and get the experiences, think with me, and let's do it. We were thinking about this, we who, two or three meetings over one month of something. Because in April, the day of April 6th it wasn't in April, then in May Ahmed was tracked by the police and he got kidnapped for a day, tortured for 12 hours. And all this time over May he was trying to keep away from the police, not to be arrested again. And we met in a secret place by coordination with some of our friends, this mutual friend that I met, and we made the first meeting. And here we just, we found that we have the dream, we're thinking the same way, we want to make the same thing, so we said that yes, let's start. We made like three meetings later for more people, more young people, thinking about what shall we do? And in this time, during these meetings, we were participating here and there in solidarity events with different marginalized people in Egypt, some poor people, some farmers here and there that might face unjust situation. So during these meetings and very minor activities we were preparing for the founding day, the founding conference for the movement. And we did it. Almost we said nothing. Just it was a gathering in the clearing, the movement that we're going to start something.

Basem Fathy – Influence of Iraqi Poet Ahmed Matar

I was reading poem in general since I was 10 years old, then first time I read about freedom and justice it was a poem by an Iraqi poet, his name is Ahmed Matar. And he was very interested in politics, freedom, and justice in the Arab countries, all the Arab countries, and that's why he has been exiled from Iraq to Kuwait first, then from Kuwait to London. So he was struggling as well. And I read for him for the first time when I was 12 years old, and he was very passionate. And if I made all of what I'm doing now to somebody, it might be for Ahmed Matar. Ahmed Matar, he was writing only about freedom and justice in the Arab countries, in all Arab countries. He wrote nothing else. And even his life, for me it was very inspiring. The man who was open to be exiled from his country to another country, then to be exiled again from the country that he went to, to be exiled twice just because you believe in something; being not very popular, by the way, again only because his writing was freedom and that's why he's not popular. If he is writing about love and romance, a lot of people would read him. But because he decided to write only about freedom, that's why his books weren't allowed to be sold and not a lot of people know about him. This is Ahmed Matar. The, I was having a lesson of mathematics, again mathematics, and the teacher was putting some of his poems in the papers of mathematics. So this was very strange. So I knew him through the teacher of the mathematics. It was in the papers and books of this man. He was putting some texts from Ahmed Matar, and this is the first time I read about him. Then later I met a friend, he wasn't involved in the beginning but I met him when I was 12, then we've met again in Tahrir Square after 16 years and this friend, he was a big fan of Ahmed Matar as well and he helped me to get some of his books. So this was the start of the Ahmed Matar ideas; then of course the internet, again. I might say some in Arabic and translate it, if you might help in translating. [SPEAKES IN ARABIC] 'It happens sometimes that we die to our souls, and we can smell while our prisoner, our guard of our prison is not here, we can smell the human' [SPEAKES IN ARABIC] 'We succeed to make the smile escape from the cracks of the sorrow' [speaks in Arabic] 'We succeed to clean the kindness from the spots of the bad feelings that might come when we're meeting our neighbors' [SPEAKES IN ARABIC] 'We can train the tears to keep in eyes' [SPEAKES IN ARABIC] 'And by this small amount of faith we can spoil the joy of the tyranny and resist the oppression'.

Basem Fathy – “Events Leading up to Tahrir Square”

We used some of the days; we were having some major events during the year like the Egyptian Love Day, some historical days, and the police day. And we used for the two years before the 25th of January 2011 to commemorate this day by protesting against torture by police. It was one of the very severe problems of the Egyptian political regime that even past the level of being political, and the people of Egypt started to be tortured by police for no reasons. Here, like I told you, we used to commemorate the day by protesting against torture of the police, and in 2010 there was a very important accident of killing an Alexandrian Egyptian young guy. His name was Khaled Saeed, he had been tortured to death by the police, just in the street. He's not politically involved; he's a very regular young man. That's why protesting against torture by police on this day, it was planned to be very huge this year, even before we know that it's going to be a revolution or anything. But again, it's a usual event to do. After the spark of the revolution in Tunisia, we got very inspired. And when Ben Ali caved, when the Tunisian succeeded to topple Ben Ali, here it became very different. OK, it's the time for the revolution. OK, it's nothing, I mean the Tunisians did it and we can do it. For me, for my fellows, for my friends, we was believing all the time that yes, we're going to do it and we can do it. But nobody knows when. But for the rest of the Egyptians, it was a golden moment to tell them, the Tunisians did it and you can do it. The change totally, it's all about changing the minds of the people from the status of I can't do it to the status that I can do it. And this was very helpful, the Tunisian revolution, it was very helpful on this level changing the mentality of the people to believe that they can do it. So after Ben Ali escaped, this was on 14 of January 2011, 11 days before the start of our revolution, we started to make daily meetings with the different groups of political movements, the political parties' youth. I told you that the political parties in Egypt they were totally corrupt, but still there was small groups of young people, young, youth wings of these political groups that we were coordinating together to do something. So we were meeting what shall we do on the day. What we thought about, we were very inspired by Tunisia but still everything around us was very disappointing. All the analysts in the world, in Egypt and outside Egypt, they were saying one sentence: Egypt is not Tunisia. We don't know why. We believe that no difference, but anyway. We were very passionate and I can tell you we had a lot of failing experiences. That's why you can say that we used to fail. So I mean, we didn't expect something definitely -- we expected to have, I don't know how to say it-- we expected to have a bigger protest, but not a revolution. Everybody was having the hope that it was going to be a revolution like Tunisia.

Basem Fathy – “Taking a Stand at Asr el-Nile Bridge”

We have to be very fair that after all of this year, our main task or our main success, it was spreading the message, telling the people that you can do it. But it seemed like the people decided how they are going to do it. We are 100, 500, 1,000; how can we manage all of these thousands of people? So on 25th of January it wasn't violent, even from the police, they didn't make anything unless at the end of the day 12 a.m. they started to shoot us, tear gas and live ammunition. They evacuated the square. And here again, I became an individual, just going with the people here and there. Of course nobody knows me actually, to ask me what should we do but it was very, very collective action; unplanned, un-orchestrated, collective action. And we spent the whole night just going around some streets, chanting, and then I went back home, very tired of course, and while I was watching the TV on the second two days, 26th and 27th, and while I was very keen, me and the other friends, on how we can move the people again on 28th, Friday, 28th of January, the main day of revolution and the most violent day, we just found the people again marching all over the country, chanting against the regime. Then on 28th of January, here was the battle. The police used everything; using the vehicles to crash us, using the bullets, rubber bullets and live ammunition, tear gases, water bombs, everything. And simply I can remember that I was on the main battle, on Asr el-Nile Bridge to Tahrir Square. I don't know how we did this, but we were moving towards the first row, I did it, and just standing like this, and telling the police soldier to kill me if he wants. A lot of people started to be killed around me and this was very extraordinary moment that instead of deciding to go back, away from this bloodshed, I just decided to go forward. And this was the case with all, and going forward, just standing, telling them kill us if you want but we're going to pass anyway. And we did it to Tahrir Square. I'm not that brave. But it's extraordinary moment when you decide that this man who got killed beside you, he has been killed for something. And you have to go, and you have to continue this.