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By Marina Mahathir

### [The New Language of Revolution](#)

Who would have thought it? Only less than two months ago, nobody, least of all me, would have dreamed that the new language of revolution would be Arabic. For so long the language of rebellion has been Spanish or Eastern European, maybe Indonesian.

But Arabic? No, Arabic was the supposed language of piety. It is what you use to show that you're more religious than anyone else. Thus you can begin a speech with long passages in Arabic without bothering to translate and have everyone assume that you were invoking God's name. Arabic is the language of choice when you wanted to name your children so that they will grow up pious and good, although it is difficult to prove that they actually will.

Arabic was also the language by which you exclude people. You tell people they can only read the Quran in Arabic, regardless of whether they understood it or not, because to read it in languages you actually did understand was not the same. Thus God's word was available to an exclusive few, instead of to all humanity.

Arabic was also the language of us and the Other, the ummah and the kafir. About what was haram and halal. Who was with us, and who was not.

But since January 2011, Arabic has become a different language. It has become the language of revolt and rebellion, and of freedom. Suddenly the whole world knows that the Arabic word for liberation is 'tahrir'.

Those of us on Twitter also learnt the word 'Yalla!' (roughly, Viva!). Other new words for us:

Amal = Hope  
Democratiiyah = Democracy  
Karamah = Dignity  
Kefaya! = Enough!

(For an extensive list of Revolutionary Arabic, take a look [here](#).)

How important is it to have this new language of revolution? To me, it is hugely important because language represents mindsets. So when language changes, mindsets also change. And with these new Arabic words we are learning, we are also learning about a new kind of Arab.

Previously we knew of only two kinds of Arabs. One was the fantastically wealthy Arab oil sheikh who goes to Harrods in London and buys up everything without bothering with the price tags. The cartoon stereotype is of the Arab sheikh in his white jubah and red and white headress, being chauffeured in his sleek limousine accompanied by his four wives. Over here, as always, we looked on this wealth as

somehow God-given and we bow and scrape as they threw us a few coins here and there. That, we thought, is what we want to be because after all they are Arabs, they guard the Holy Cities and surely it must be all blessed by God.

The other stereotype is of the very holy Arab, intoning away on all the evils of the world, all of which seem to emanate from the West. These men ( for they are almost always men) in their long beards we worship because they seem holy and they seem to do the 'right' things, beginning with putting women under covers, and they must surely be guaranteed a place in heaven. Oh we all must strive to be like them! And we shall start by emulating their clothing!

My, how things have changed! Now we know that the oil sheikhs keep most of their people living at under USD2 a day while they build palaces for themselves and their families. We know that when they take over the leadership of their countries, they often do away with elections and stay for decades (Ben Ali of Tunisia, 23 years; Mubarak of Egypt, 30 years; Gaddafi of Libya, 42 years; Bouteflika of Algeria, 23 years; Saleh of Yemen, 32 years), during which time they enriched themselves while their people starved.

We are also now learning that to stay in power, these dictators can be viciously brutal. Although the Tunisian and Egyptian revolution was relatively peaceful (*relative* being the operative word), the response to the protests in Bahrain and Libya have been astoundingly ruthless. In Bahrain, the Army (comprising mostly non-Bahrainis in the rank and file) have fired [live ammunition at protestors](#) at funerals, refused to allow ambulances to pick up the wounded and even fired teargas and bullets into hospitals. There are extremely graphic photos of the dead and wounded which have been posted on Twitter by eyewitnesses.

In Libya, Gaddafi's army has used mercenaries from other African countries to [shoot](#) at their own people. When such governments feel the need to use foreign mercenaries to kill their own people, surely this means that they know they are not legitimate governments?

Meanwhile, the OIC and individual Muslim countries have been completely silent. *Deathly* silent. Could it be that they are shocked that people in these countries are actually demanding 'Western' things like freedom and rights? Could it be possible that the educated and the uneducated, the rich and the poor, the Muslim and the Christian and men and women are actually standing together and saying they want their 'leaders' out? That they actually want a say in how their lives are run? (Oh my, the Star actually published an article by an actual Egyptian today talking about how [peaceful the protests](#) were! Could it be that our vocabulary about protest is changing too?)

And predictably our ulama have nothing to say. Why, Al-Azhar University (where we have 6000 students) and the Grand Mufti of Egypt were discredited for supporting Mubarak. And then [Yusuf Al-Qaradawi](#), the exiled Islamic leader returns to lead prayers at Tahrir Square and says, well, pretty revolutionary things. (Except he still didn't say that women should be equal to men, even though women were very much part of the revolution...sigh..).

But our ulama remain silent. Instead they spend their time worrying about how Valentine's Day is going to rot our morals, instead of condemning Muslims who spill their own people's blood. I'm sorry but they don't hold any moral authority anymore to me.



Wael Ghonim speaks to the crowd at Tahrir Square after being released after 10 days by the police

Yup, today we have a new Arab. He (and she) is young, internet-savvy, demanding a say in how their countries are run. They want room for everyone, regardless of religion, gender, race or class. They want to speak, and to breathe. Is it any wonder that one of the initiators of the Egyptian revolution is a Google executive called Wael Ghonim? Or a young woman called Asmaa Mahfouz?



So now, do we follow the examples set by these Arabs, just as we so diligently followed before?

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