

From the Pyramid to the Square

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THE Egyptian strongman Field Marshal Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi was recently in Moscow visiting with Russian strongman Vladimir Putin. Putin reportedly offered Sisi \$2 billion in arms — just what a country like Egypt, where half the women can't read, needs. The whole meeting struck me as so 1960s, so Nasser meets Khrushchev — two strongmen bucking each other up in the age of strong people and superempowered individuals. Rather than discuss arms sales, Sisi and Putin should have watched a movie together.

Specifically, Sisi should have brought a copy of "[The Square](#)" — the first Egyptian film ever nominated for an Oscar. It's up this year. Sisi has a copy. Or, to be more precise, his film censor's office does. For the last few months, the Egyptian authorities have been weighing whether to let the film — an inspiring and gripping documentary that follows six activists from the earliest days of the Tahrir Square revolution in 2011 until the Muslim Brotherhood was ousted by Sisi in 2013 — to be shown in Egypt.

Photo



"The Square," about the revolution in Egypt, might be a good movie for Vladimir Putin and other strongmen to see. Credit Netflix/Noujaim Films, via Associated Press

Meanwhile, pirated and downloaded copies of the film, which is also on Netflix, have spread virally across Egypt and been viewed by many Egyptians in homes and coffeeshops and discussed on social media. What's more, it was recently dubbed into Ukrainian and downloaded (some 300,000 times) by protesters there and shown in the Maidan, which also means the Square, in Kiev. A dubbed version is now spreading in Russia, too, said the film's director Jehane Noujaim, who also directed "Control Room."

"This is the globalization of defiance," Noujaim said to me. "With cheap, affordable cameras and Internet connections, anyone now can change the conversation" anywhere. It's true.

The film resonates with those who gathered in squares from Cairo to Caracas to Kiev, added the film's producer, Karim Amer, because it captures an increasingly universal phenomenon: average people uniting and deciding "that the Pharaoh, the strongman, won't protect us" and the religious sheikh "won't cleanse us." We can be and must be "authors of our own story." It has long been said, added Amer, that "history is written by the victors. Not anymore." Now versions can come from anywhere and anyone. Power is shifting "from the pyramid to the square" — from strongmen to strong people — "and that is a big shift."

And that's why Putin and Sisi need to see the film. (Disclosure: the filmmakers are friends of mine, and I have been discussing their project with them for two years.) It captures some of the most important shifts happening today, starting with fact that in today's hyperconnected world wealth is getting concentrated at the top, but, at the same time, power is getting distributed at the bottom and transparency is being injected everywhere. No palace will remain hidden by high walls, not even the giant one reportedly being built for Putin on the Black Sea.

But people now can't just see in, they can see far — how everybody else is living. And as Tahrir and Kiev demonstrate, young people will no longer tolerate leaders who deprive them of the tools and space to realize their full potential. The Square has a Facebook page where Egyptians are invited to answer questions, including: "Who would you most like to watch this movie with?" One answer, from Magda Elmaghrabi, probably spoke for many: "I would watch it with my dad who passed away 9 years ago. He emigrated to the States not for lack of wealth, but for his fears of what would happen in the future for Egypt and whether there would be opportunities for my 2 older brothers. I would love to have discussed what occurred and see his emotional reaction as the Egyptians stood up for what they believed in."

Another reason Putin, Sisi and all their protesters need to see "The Square" is that it doesn't have a happy ending — for anyone, not yet. Why?

The Egyptian protesters got sidelined by the army, because while they all wanted to oust the Pharaoh, they couldn't agree on a broader reform agenda and translate that into a governing majority. But Putin and Sisi will also lose if they don't change, because there is no stable progress without inclusive politics and economics. I understand the need and longing by those *not* in the squares for "stability" and "order." Putin and Sisi both rose to power on that longing for stability after so much revolutionary ferment. But both men have to be asked: Stability to do what? To go where? To jail not just real terrorists, but, in Sisi's and Putin's cases, legitimate journalists and opposition and youth leaders? Many Asian autocrats imposed order, but they also built schools, infrastructure and a rule of law that nurtured middle classes that eventually delivered democracy.

So the protesters are long on idealism but short on a shared political action plan. Sisi and Putin are long on stability but short on a politics of inclusion tied to a blueprint for modernity (and not just rising oil prices). Unless they each overcome their deficiencies, their countries will fail to fulfill their potential — and all their "squares" will be stages for conflict, not launching pads for renewal.