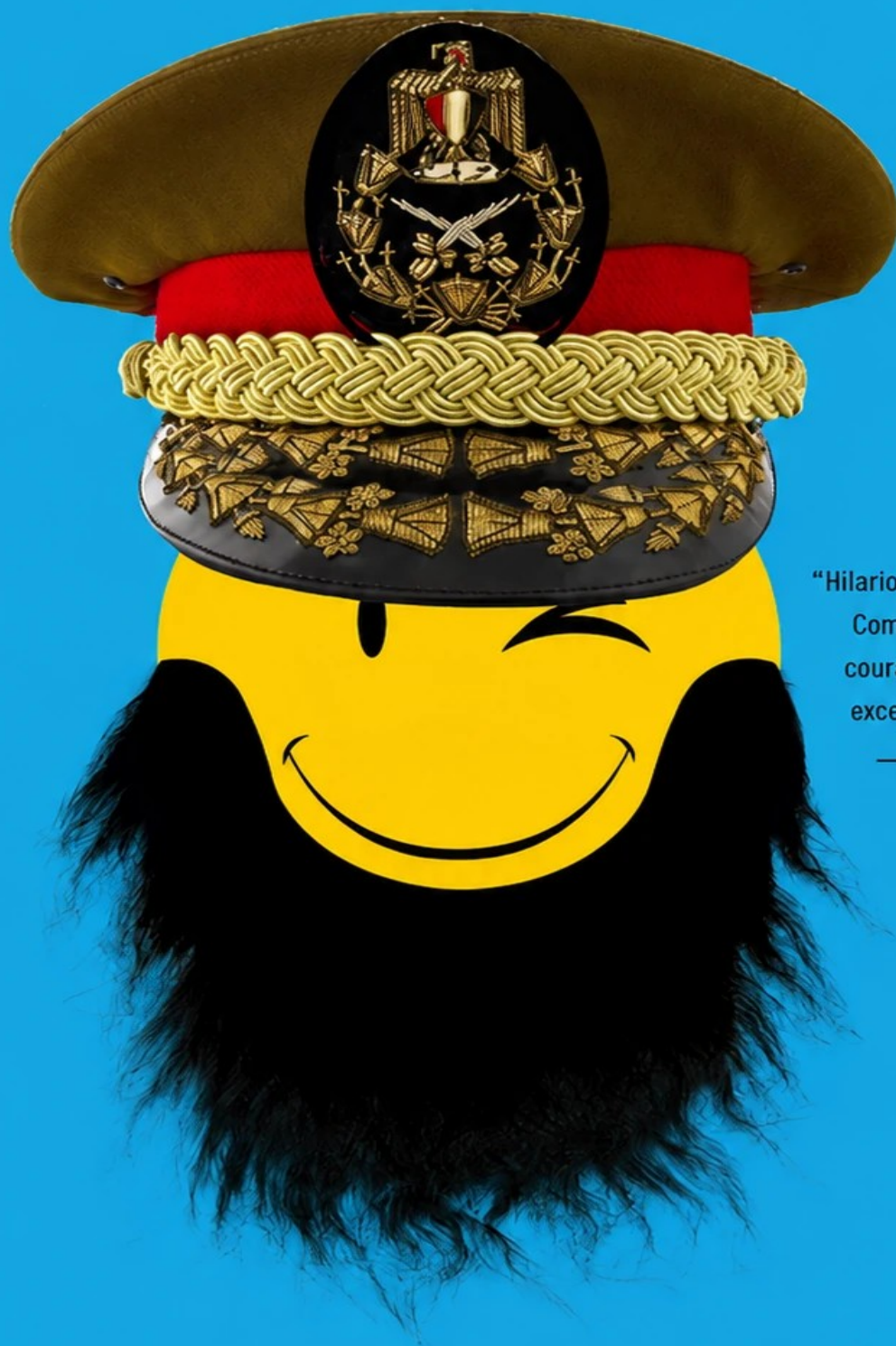


REVOLUTION FOR DUMMIES

LAUGHING THROUGH THE ARAB SPRING

BASSEM YOUSSEF



"Hilarious and heartbreaking.

Comedy shouldn't take
courage, but it made an
exception for Bassem."

—JON STEWART

REVOLUTION FOR DUMMIES

LAUGHING THROUGH THE ARAB SPRING

BASSEM YOUSSEF

 **DEY ST.**
An Imprint of WILLIAM MORROW

DEDICATION

**TO MY DAUGHTER, NADIA—YOU ARE A VERY HARD
ACT TO FOLLOW. MY UNBORN CHILDREN WILL HAVE
TO COME UP WITH UNTHINKABLE FEATS JUST TO
MATCH YOUR LEVEL OF AWESOMENESS.**

**TO MY WIFE—I KNOW YOU DIDN'T EXPECT THIS
KIND OF MARRIAGE OR LIFE, BUT HEY . . . NOT A
DULL MOMENT, BABE. WITHOUT YOUR PATIENCE,
RESILIENCE, AND SUPPORT I WOULDN'T HAVE
AMOUNTED TO ANYTHING.**

**TO MY OLDER BROTHER AND MY FRIEND, TAMER
YOUSSEF—YOU ARE ALL THAT IS LEFT AFTER OUR
PARENTS DEPARTED THIS WORLD. YOU ARE ALL
THAT REMAINS OF AN EGYPT I ONCE KNEW.**

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

(or Why Did I Buy This Book Again?)

You might expect me to narrate the epic events of the Arab Spring—to tell you the details of the geopolitical and sociological circumstances (whatever that means) that led to the various Arab revolutions throughout the Middle East, and the great hopes and aspirations that came with them. You might expect me to give you an in-depth analysis of how everything there now seems to be a total desperate mess. But do you really care about that? Be honest, don't you just want to make it *seem* like you understand the Middle East by dropping knowledge bombs (at least these don't hurt) on your friends, but you'd rather hear it from that Egyptian guy you saw a couple of times on *The Daily Show*? I mean, even people from my country stopped caring a long time ago about *why* we are a shitshow. For us in the Middle East, injustice, oppression, and the insanity of justifying them are now just an integral part of our government-sponsored daily news; nothing surprises us anymore. We have somehow embraced the failure, disappointment, and futility of what everything has become, the same way you guys embrace PBS: you don't know why it's still on the air, but somehow you've all accepted it.

Plus, if you really wanted to get an objective, in-depth study about what the hell is happening in the Middle East, you'd go get a book published by some wonky think tank in Washington. There are dozens of these books claiming they've got the "answer" for what the hell is happening there . . . yet the Middle East is still a big mess. So either no one is reading these books or even heavily funded policy institutions don't know jack shit about us. So let me give you some advice. If you think you are ever going to truly understand what is happening in the Middle East . . . *stop!*

Instead of giving you some underwhelming history lesson, I'm going to tell you my story—what happened to me while the revolution occurred and my unexpected role within it. Yeah, sure, “my story” makes me sound important, but really it is just a ploy to keep you interested! Hell, you might think I'm an arrogant son of a bitch for thinking that people would buy a book just to hear “my story,” and you are right; who the fuck do I think I am? But then again, you're the same country that published and bought biographies about Paris Hilton and Heidi Montag. Hell, even Fabio wrote a fucking book. So if you're looking to read about fake boobs, sex tapes, or a man with long blond hair who half-nakedly rides a horse—then you're right—you won't care about my story.

But the problem is I have already received an advance from the publisher (which I've already spent), so either I come up with a book or hustle my way through paying back the advance. And since I can't really escape the publisher by fleeing back to my country, from which I had to escape more than two years ago (more on that later!), I might as well write the goddamn book.

How my story is not already in development to be an awards-season darling is beyond me. Picture this: an Arab man (played by Javier Bardem with an accent because, you know, Hollywood's diversity problem) grows up to save a *few lives* as a heart surgeon, but when a whole region experiences the biggest clusterfuck in its history, he saves the *whole nation* with his jokes. The writers may have to take some liberties in order to write a happy ending and appeal to an American audience, but enjoy your second Oscar, Javier.

However, the movie has yet to be made, so you're just going to have to read this book. Through it you will see how ignorance, xenophobia, racism, and everything that Donald Trump stands for can transcend borders, cultures, and religions. You will find how easy it is to brainwash masses of people, however well informed they think they are, without the funding of Fox News, the pure hatred that is Ann Coulter, or the Bible. After the fame and the short-lived celebrity life I had in Egypt, my story is all I have left. So

consider me your companion for the next seventy thousand words (yes, that's the minimum the publisher asked for). If you're lucky, reading this book may incite an interesting conversation (or fight!) at a bar. In certain parts of the country, I bet you'll look and sound exotic (i.e., "un-American") reading a short history of the Arab Spring through the eyes of the "Jon Stewart of Egypt." If you are liberal, you will attract other liberals—you know, being interested in the matters of the world and shit. If you're really lucky, you might even get laid tonight by some hot chick! (If you are a woman, that last sentence is totally sexist and was planted there by my editor.) And if you are a Republican, well . . . I'm sorry! That must be really tough for you.

Most books about the Arab Spring start on January 25, 2011, when the Egyptian Revolution officially began. It's the logical jumping-off point, and trust me, we will get there. But remember, this book is also about me, and I'm the one writing it . . . so let's jump forward a couple of years and start with something to really grab you, like the time I was trying to flee from my own country, to become an ex-funny man, a fugitive on the run.

PART ONE

A HEART SURGEON BREAKING BAD

EXODUS ON EMIRATES AIRLINES

NOVEMBER 11, 2014

Cairo doesn't have any traffic lights. Well, it really does, but the streets are regulated by the sheer volume of vehicles chugging through its lanes, all trying to get somewhere while getting nowhere. This is how you know you are in an Arab country: you are either stuck in a revolution or in traffic. Egypt has the distinction of having both.

On November 11, stalled in that same notorious traffic, I was dead silent. I kept refreshing my Twitter feed, noting that the news of the verdict against me had yet to break.

Abbas, my friend who was accompanying me, asked if I was doing okay. I mumbled that I was fine.

As the chaos of the streets reeled around me, I looked outside the window and saw an old billboard with my face on it. Not many months ago this face was on almost every billboard in every main street in Cairo—the face of the most popular show in Egypt and the Arab world.

Tarek, my friend in Dubai, kept calling Abbas's phone to get updates on our status.

"We haven't arrived at the airport yet," Abbas answered. "Yes, Emirates airlines' flight is on time. Will tell you when we pass the customs check."

Tarek had escaped Egypt a year before me. Never did I think I would be following in his footsteps and running from the same country that voted me the "most popular media personality" three years in a row. What's a popularity contest worth if it doesn't offer immunity from political exile?

“Do you think they’ll let me travel?” I asked Abbas in a low voice so the driver wouldn’t hear. “Or do you think they’ve already put me on a no-fly list?”

“Don’t worry, everything will be fine,” he said.

Both of us knew these were just empty words to comfort me. Many of the other journalists and activists in Egypt had already been banned from traveling. The question was, whose time was next?

We finally arrived at the airport, and I unloaded my two bags on the street. It was all I could hastily pack in ninety minutes. I looked at the airport building, then back to Cairo’s skyline. I wondered if this would be the last time I set eyes on it.

How did it come to this? Why did I have to flee, while tyrants and thieves got to stay? I didn’t steal, didn’t abuse my powers, and certainly didn’t hurt anyone. All I did was tell jokes.

I wheeled my bags through the terminal and then peeked at my boarding ticket.

Destination: Dubai.

Destiny: Unknown.

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS WITH A REVOLUTION

We live in an era of instant gratification in which we crave meaningless recognition: “shares” of our inflated achievements on Facebook, retweets of our 140 characters of fake wisdom on Twitter, and “likes” for the stupid photos of meals we are about to eat (and will inevitably shit out thirty-six hours later) on Instagram.

Instant gratification may be achieved from social media, but it really doesn’t work the same way for revolutions. Imagine a revolution succeeding just because of the sheer number of shares, likes, or retweets. Wouldn’t that be something?

On January 25, 2011, the Egyptian Revolution started. On February 11, 2011, Hosni Mubarak, the thirty-year dictator, stepped down.

Wait! Who the fuck is Hosni Mubarak? And isn’t Egypt in Africa? Why the hell did you need an Arab Spring in Africa?

I know I said I wasn’t going to give you a second-rate history lesson on the Middle East, but I’ve got to catch you up to speed at least a little bit. For many Americans, *Egypt*, *Muslim*, *Arabs*, *Africa* might not fit in the same sentence. The thing is, we are all that. (And much more, baby!)

Yeah, sure, our ancestors built the pyramids, and I know you’ve seen our pharaohs and gods make appearances in some of your blockbuster movies. Like when Australian actor Joel Edgerton was the *obvious* choice for Rameses II in that terrible movie *Exodus: Gods and Kings*. Or how about when Scottish actor Gerard Butler played Set (deity of chaos and war) in that piece of crap *Gods of Egypt*? The parade of moviemaking garbage goes on

and on. Not to mention, we rarely even get credit for the amazing monuments our great-great-great-great-great-great-great-(you get the picture)-great-grandparents left behind. Typically, that glory goes either to the Jews or a bunch of aliens. But then when I see what decades of dictatorships have done to my country I say to myself, *You know, maybe it wasn't us!* We are the African nation who thought it could do better but ended up doing nothing.

We don't speak "Egyptian" just like you don't speak "American." We are an Islamic country that speaks Arabic. And although we are a Muslim country, we do have a small population of Christians—so you can just think of us as a reverse United States, religion-wise. Also worth noting: we don't ride camels to work and our women aren't all belly dancers. A disappointment, I know.

Politically, we've gone from pharaohs to khedives (whatever the hell that means) to presidents. By the time we reached 2011, Hosni Mubarak was a third-generation president, essentially meaning he was the third president of Egypt since Egypt started a love affair with military regimes. Calling it a love affair is being generous, though, as it is more of a domestic abuse situation in which the wife is battered, bruised, and brainwashed into thinking that her husband "really loves her."

And it only took eighteen days to kick to the curb the dictator who ruled us for thirty years. Thirty years—also known in the Middle East as a "short first term"—was the life expectancy of our leaders in the Middle East.

You might find it strange or unusual but isn't that better than what we see in a backward Western democracy like the United States? You guys spent over \$5 billion this past election just to get a president for four years? That's like throwing a massive new wedding for your spoiled-brat daughter every four years because she keeps marrying and divorcing rat-schmucks like Ted Cruz and Chris Christie. You really need to revisit how democracy should work, guys. I mean, after all this money-spending you wound up with Donald Trump.

In the Middle East assholes come for free.

You see, in the Arab world we need to make long-term plans, and we can't just change them every four years because of the uncertainty of something trivial like elections! We have to plan ahead for our vacations, commitments, and jail time. Your democracy won't really cut it for us. Plus, you got Trump as president, so you're really not in a position to mock our "democracy" or our "choices" (even if we don't have any) of horrible leaders.

So back to us: we had an eighteen-day revolution and believed it worked. But no revolution really happens in eighteen days. Revolutions are like bloody, agony-inducing roller coasters that often end in fiery crashes of epic failure. So it seems we had the luxury of a short-term glory, but would spend the following five years paying our debt.

I often get pissed when I see some American talk shows discuss how "disappointed" they are that our revolution of eighteen days didn't work. This breed of Americans thinks that your Revolutionary War took the same time it took to shoot the movie *The Patriot*.

Prior to our revolution, I wasn't an activist or remotely involved in any kind of politics. I was a heart surgeon. Let that sink in: I used to cut open people's chests for a living.

By 2010, I had finished all my American medical-license exams and was desperately looking for a way out to work in the U.S. Honestly, I never really liked being a doctor. It was just a great line to open a conversation with a hot chick. The conversation usually didn't go anywhere because I sucked at talking to women, but as a doctor you get the added benefit of talking to women without them answering back while they are under anesthesia. Sick, I know!

I had my fantasies of becoming a worldwide star, maybe an actor. By some miracle I would win an Oscar and marry Jennifer Aniston in the process. But since there was no clear path on how to get there, I did the next best thing and became a nerd.

You see, I come from a typical middle-class family. My father was a judge, my mom was a university professor, and my older brother was an engineer. Having a son as a doctor or an engineer is a coveted social status.

Since I hated numbers and biology made more sense to me, I went to medical school to complete the family portrait. Now my mother could brag about “my son the doctor and my other son the engineer.” I know! We almost sounded like a Jewish family!

Even though I didn’t like medicine, I tried to make the best of it. But working as a doctor in Egypt, in its ever-failing, underfunded, good-for-nothing health-care system, puts a lot of pressure on you. I thought if I could work as a doctor in a different country I would at least feel better about what I did. So I put my nerd power into overdrive and passed every single possible exam to get the hell out of there. I finally found an opening in Cleveland. I was excited that this might be my way out. Nothing can tell you how desperate I was to get out of the country like my getting pumped about going to Cleveland. Basically, the way I felt about Egypt was the same way LeBron James felt about Cleveland when he moved to Miami. One man’s Cleveland is another man’s Miami.

Before 2011, I was politically apathetic. This is a normal feeling after having lived with the same president for thirty years. We were even waiting for Mubarak, the ailing dictator, to push his son into his place. It was something like the Bush and Clinton dynasties but without elections, transparency, competition, accountability, or . . . anything. If an Arab president decides his son is the next president, you can object, but it won’t change anything. As a matter of fact, the dictator can be dead already and the powers that be will bring his son from London, change the constitution since the son is younger than the required age, and usher him into the presidency. That exact sequence happened in Syria with Bashar al-Assad, so why not with us?

When January 2011 came along, I was waiting for my visa papers to arrive from Cleveland when something radically unusual happened: hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets.

Where did all those people come from? There was a mix of young and old people, with a hodgepodge of beliefs, yet there were no religious slogans. No complicated chants. They were shouting, “Down, down, Hosni Mubarak.”

There are many stories of why people took to the streets. Maybe the most circulated one was about a Facebook page calling for a demonstration dedicated to renouncing police brutality in the wake of a young student being tortured and killed by the police. (Careful, America!)

The other unofficial story was that the Arab Spring started in Tunisia, which inspired young people in Egypt. We were not going to be upstaged by this small puny motherfucking country called Tunisia. Egypt is way bigger, cooler, and older than Tunisia, obviously. So yeah, there is a high probability that we may have started our revolution because we were simply attention whores and drama queens. Call us the Kardashians of the political world.

If you were in the streets, it looked like an uprising, a revolution with thousands out there demanding their freedom and for Mubarak to step down. But the national networks refused to broadcast the unrest. There was a nationwide split personality disorder on display, in which two separate realities existed simultaneously: the brutal reality of the streets and the tranquil reality of the TV. According to the TV media, this was not a revolution but a conspiracy orchestrated by the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), Mossad (Israeli national intelligence agency), Hezbollah (Lebanese Shi'a Islamist militant group), Hamas (Palestinian Sunni-Islamic fundamentalist organization), and maybe even the Village People (New York's super-gay disco group from the seventies).

Pundits were popping up all over the screen to tell us about the "American Zionist conspiracy" to bring down Egypt, citing evidence to support that Iran and Hamas were also involved. You can't make that shit up.

With all those nations and security and intelligence agencies getting together to conspire against us, you would think that the Egyptian Revolution had already succeeded in the one thing every contestant in every beauty pageant claims she wants to achieve: world peace.

"Those lovely youth in the streets don't know what they are getting themselves into," one pundit said. "Our Egyptian youth are falling victim to international conspiracies put into effect by our enemies." It was as if he was

saying, *Whoops! Thousands of people just happened to accidentally take to the streets at the same time fundamentalist groups and counterintelligence agencies were looking to sabotage the Egyptian government.*

Sometimes, if you switched on the television you would see the cameras fixed on an empty bridge or a tranquil view of the Nile. One channel's producer was so dumb that on a day when the camera was fixed on one of those bridges, he didn't realize that at the top of the screen, on another bridge, huge clashes between protestors and security forces were taking place! News programming at its finest.

The protests heralded in a new chapter: the rich, the poor, the liberal, the Islamist, the Christian, all sharing this common space in Tahrir Square. For three days I watched the clashes on international news networks and didn't know what to make of it.

I was one of those people who saw the Tunisian dictator flee his country a few weeks before, and like many people I never thought the same thing could happen in Egypt. Tunisians are one of the most educated populations in the Arab world. On the other hand, Egypt has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the region. "Egypt is not Tunisia" was the most repeated phrase on television. I, like many other Egyptians, believed that sentiment. Deep inside we hated the regime, but after thirty years of political stagnation, we never thought that change could actually be possible.

AFTER THREE DAYS OF BEING CLEARED FROM THE STREETS BY the police, many protestors called for January 28 to be the "Day of Anger," in which the protestors proclaimed that they would not leave the streets this time.

On that day the government made quite possibly the worst decision possible: they shut down mobile phone service across the nation.

Now people with no communication would have to see for themselves what was happening in the square. News about masses of Egyptians pouring into the streets was circulating widely. My wife, Hala, whom I had married only a couple of months earlier, was scared. She fought with me because I

wanted to go to the square. “Can’t you see the clashes in the streets? I am not ready to be a widow yet!” she said.

So I stayed home with her and watched the BBC and Al Jazeera channels, which were broadcasting live. The security forces seemed adamant that no one would come into the square that day.

We witnessed something that we never thought we would see in our lifetime. Lines after lines of anti-riot police faced tens of thousands of protestors wanting to reach the square. The authorities considered this an ultimate standoff, where all bets were made or lost on those three hundred feet leading to the square. It was a scene that even Steven Spielberg couldn’t come up with.

I kid, he can do anything!

After hours of clashes, endless amounts of tear gas, rubber bullets, and armored cars crushing protestors, it happened: hundreds of black-suited heavily armored men turned the other way and started running. We the People were chasing after the police! It was unbelievable to see it the other way round. The almighty face of authority fell right there and then. Decades of fear and awe inflicted by an authoritarian regime fell at the feet of the protestors, who ran over the police gear to take the square.

Millions like me decided to come down to the streets to see it with our own eyes.

We felt like we had entered a post-apocalyptic movie set. (Hey! Maybe it *was* Spielberg after all!) There was the heavy smell of gas from the clashes the night before mixed with the smoke rising from burned, well, everything: shops and cars were completely destroyed. People were dancing and singing on destroyed police armored vehicles. Others were preparing for a long sit-in by setting up makeshift hospitals, organizing places to stay, and handing out food, while looters took over the burned-out building of the ruling party. We saw people running away with office chairs and even AC units. The L.A. riots looked pedestrian by comparison.

As we approached the middle of the square, things were a little more organized. No looting or chaos there. Protestors were already setting up what

would, in a few days, become the main stage. Checkpoints were being formed and huge banners prepared. The biggest of all read: THE PEOPLE DEMAND THE FALL OF THE REGIME. It rolls off the tongue a little better in Arabic.

And then, of course, there were photographers, news reporters, and television crews. I passed by an American reporter from ABC interviewing one of the men setting up the tents. She was having difficulty understanding his poor English. I volunteered to translate and her face lit up, as if to say, *Ohhh thank god, someone speaks our language*. I think I stole that guy's thunder, but it was time for me to make my TV debut. I can't remember what she asked me exactly, but I remember saying, "Mubarak has already fallen."

She was surprised and asked me, "Isn't it a bit premature for that assumption?"

"I don't know if what I am saying is making any sense or not," I replied. "I am no politician or analyst, but I think Mubarak will fall, will be captured, and will be put on trial."

Oh, how cute and delusional at the same time, her smile seemed to say, which left me with a feeling that I was either too optimistic or just plain stupid. The jury is still out.

My relationship with Tahrir Square over the next few days was a casual one. I didn't stay overnight but would visit every day, as my wife and I distributed food to the people staying there. Despite the festive mood inside the square, something else was happening on the outside. Hundreds of thugs started appearing everywhere along the roads leading to the square. These paid thugs were an effective weapon used by the police for the past thirty years. They were used to suppress minor demonstrations, so it would seem that a struggle between different factions of the people had occurred. These thugs were also used to scare voters from entering polling stations during elections. They would later be employed by the authorities to do their dirty work, without getting uniformed police involved—not to mention they would be the ones to attack my studio three years later. These thugs had had a name for years, and it was coined by the state-run media: "honorable citizens." Over the next couple of years we would become very familiar with