



REGION



Last Days of the Pharaoh by Bradley Hope, Kindle Single: Amazon, 2012. 48pp; Available through Amazon's cloud reader or on the Kindle/iPad/etc

‘Last Pharaoh’s’ last stand

Bradley Hope, a US journalist based in Cairo who has just published *Last Days of the Pharaoh*, **examining Egypt’s 2011 uprising**, describes to *Times of Oman* some of the interesting facets of his e-book sojourn

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MUSCAT: This is the story of how Egypt’s ‘last Pharaoh’ fell. A lot has already been written about it. But this one throws light on some of the untold anecdotes of those 18 fateful days that reshaped Egypt’s history, and indeed the region’s.

Egypt-based US journalist Bradley Hope, who has weaved his tale based on interviews with senior officials and political leaders close to Hosni Mubarak, believes that sometimes one can get to the truth — of what happened during a big event — only after some time has passed by.

“The pace of news in the region (Middle East) has been so fast over the last year-and-a-half that there hasn’t been a lot of time for looking closer at what happened in the countries of the Arab Spring,” Hope, a New York University graduate, told *Times of Oman*.

No wonder that while reporting on Egypt’s transition, he found himself constantly wondering what exactly happened during those 18 days, and whether the people at the helm were completely corrupt, completely delusional, or a mixture of the two?

“Many of the NDP (Mubarak’s National Democratic Party) officials and others who were close to the president (Mubarak) were scared of speaking in those first months, but 18 months later they began feeling more comfortable about giving their side of the story,” said Hope, while earmarking some of the key challenges he faced in his writing sojourn.

“The biggest challenge was first to convince these former top NDP officials to speak, but after that it was checking and cross-referencing their accounts for accuracy. Some of the discussions they had can’t be easily confirmed because the other people involved are in prison — or in the case of Omar Suleiman, the former spy chief of Egypt, dead,” said the scribe who moved to Cairo in April 2011 to cover North Africa as a foreign correspondent.

Among the most notable interviews in the book is the one with Hossam Badrawi, the last secretary-general of the then-ruling NDP, who was appointed during the 18-day uprising and failed to save the regime.

Do you think Badrawi could have changed the history of Egypt if he had been able to convince Mubarak of the need to announce political reforms and handing over power, immediately?

“Badrawi ultimately failed to convince the president — and his close advisors — to follow his advice. We can never know what would have happened if Mubarak had followed his plan completely, but it would have certainly made it possible for a softer exit for the Mubarak family,” replied Hope, who worked for two



Bradley Hope (centre) in Libya last year, where he was reporting on the fall of Muammar Gaddafi. - Supplied picture

years as a police reporter and feature writer for the *New York Sun* before joining an Abu Dhabi publication.

“The key thing about Badrawi is he was a reformer within the NDP, not someone criticising it from the outside. His philosophy was that change could come from within the party and I am not sure that was actually possible, considering the NDP’s long history and the dominance of the old guard who were involved since the 1970s.

“I think it is fair to say there was a flaw in thinking the party could be reformed from within. What Mubarak truly needed to do — and it would have been good if he did this in the 1980s — was to reform the political system so that there were periodic rotations of power and room for real political parties to exist and contest seats in parliament.”

Lack of vision

Mubarak’s greatest failure, according to Hope, was his lack of vision for Egypt, both politically and economically. The consequences, Hope reiterates, are felt everyday in Egypt, where people struggle to get by and most political parties are still very inexperienced because they are so new. “Even if it turned out that Mubarak and his family had stolen no funds from Egypt during the last several decades, his lack of reforms represent enough of a crime,” reasons the 28-year-old author, who is the co-founder of the *New York Moon*, an experimental publication based in New York.

As a journalist based in Cairo, how does he rate current Egyptian President Mohamed Mursi’s performance so far? Does he see this year’s August protests as an ominous sign of the things to come?

“It is hard to make an assessment of a president this far into his term. He obviously has a vision for Egypt, which is laid out in the Muslim Brotherhood’s Renaissance Project. But it will take us several years to determine whether those ideas were what Egypt needed at this sensitive moment in its history.

“The protests last month were

very small in the scheme of things. I think most Egyptians are willing to give President Mursi some time to prove himself before they take to the streets again.”

Recalling some of the most telling anecdotes on Mubarak that come forth from his long interviews, Hope said Badrawi’s dramatic and frank discussions with Mubarak stand out the most during those 18 days, particularly on February 9, when he watched the president realise that his regime was finally at its end.

“But my favourite person in the e-book is Mohammed Ashoub, who was Mubarak’s make-up artist. He provided a lot of detail about what Mubarak was like — his love for his grandson; how he was exhausted and retreating from day-to-day affairs. It’s important to render dictators as human beings — with all their weaknesses and strengths — to understand historic events.

“It doesn’t mean you have to like Mubarak and justify his decisions, but it complicates an understanding of how he ruled Egypt. It would be healthy for Egypt to stop seeing everything in terms of black and white — for the purposes of reconciliation and moving on.”

Finally, as a US journalist based in the Middle East, would he acknowledge the existence of this “perception deficit” in the West when it comes to the portrayal of the ground situation here in this region?

“I think some Americans have a nuanced view of the Middle East. The US has many great newspapers, with very talented and knowledgeable foreign correspondents, so there is a lot of coverage of events in the region. Sometimes the coverage is very US-centric, but often it is quite excellent.

“But, at the same time, few Americans travel to the Middle East and I think there is a lot of room for improvement when it comes to understanding the culture, political history and religious life in these parts.

“I think the inverse is also true. Many people in the Middle East don’t fully understand the US in all its intricacies.”