

Macron's moment



SYLVIE KAUFFMANN

Weeks of violent protest by France's angry working poor are testing a president who promised the people reform but has failed to govern them

He was the saviour of Europe. A 39-year-old maverick who rescued France from the populist tide, the newcomer who crushed his far-right opponent Marine Le Pen in a TV debate on the eve of a presidential election. The leader who would make liberal democracy great again. The visionary who had a plan to jump start the European Union. A 21st-century John Kennedy. Some joked that he could walk on water.

That was 2017. Eighteen months into his presidential term, Emmanuel Macron, faced with an uprising by a leaderless army of working poor in yellow vests and by violence unseen since the student riots of May 1968, is struggling to take back control of his country. The charismatic young president was jeered by protesters who tried to chase his car this week when he visited a public building set afire by rioters in Le Puy-en-Velay, in south-central France. "Macron, démission" — "Macron, resign" — has become the rallying cry of these modern-day sans-culottes, whose anger is directed at him, personally.

In a rare show of humility, Macron admitted a month ago that

he had "failed to reconcile the people with its leaders." Little did he suspect that the anger would turn into hatred, of the kind thrown in the face of dictators by the Arab Spring. As a fourth Saturday of protests looms, in spite of an olive branch offered by the government, nobody can predict whether this revolt will eventually give way to dialogue or degenerate into an even more profound and dangerous crisis.

What went wrong? Two sets of factors have come into play. One is not specific to France: an insurrectional wave that is now a familiar feature of Western democracies shaken by the disruptions of globalisation, the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis and the inability of our traditional political parties to adjust to these new challenges. Brexit, Donald Trump's election, an emergence of the far right in Germany and a victory of anti-system parties in Italy — all, though less violent, are part of the same dynamics. Emmanuel Macron was initially seen as a bulwark against this trend. More determined than his predecessors, he would reform France with a progressive agenda that would do away with the injustices of the old world.

This is where the second set of factors comes in, and it is of the president's own making. As the historian Gérard Noiriel has noted, in Macron's book "Révolution," which introduced his presidential bid, there was no mention of the working class. His revolu-



President Emmanuel Macron, center, inspecting the damage from protests over a planned fuel tax increase in Paris this month

tion was not of the masses — it was meant to be top down, and for a while it worked. In his first year in office, the young president adroitly passed several reforms, including of a labor law, and survived a painful strike of railway workers without sacrificing a reform of the national railway

company. By then, Macron may have been thinking that he could, indeed, walk on water.

Unfortunately, nobody can — not even him. His vertical way of exercising power — some call it Jupiterian, others monarchical — became more and more of a problem: his being surrounded

by a small team of technocrats the contempt he seemed to hold for people not lucky enough to be as successful as he was; his lack of knowledge of the local political terrain because he had never been elected before. The combination left people feeling that their president was out of touch.

How Egypt crowdsources c



YASMINE EL RASHIDI

The bounds of right and wrong now extend beyond the parameters of a political system, to what is deemed to be moral for the culture and conscientious for the nation

To write in Egypt and about Egypt has long meant being under the scrutiny of an authoritarian state — starting in the 1950s with President Gamal Abdel Nasser, who nationalised the press, and extending to the present. If you didn't approve of the government's activities, your only option, you quickly learned, was to be noncommittal.

My first encounter with the red lines of authority was in the early 2000s, as a young writer at a weekly paper in Cairo. One day my editor, a well-respected journalist who stood apart from his submissive state-appointed colleagues for his outspokenness and professional rigor, called me into his office after an editorial meeting. I had proposed to write about an impending gas deal with Israel. He was apologetic but clear: There would be no talk of the gas deal.

There was an official blackout on coverage of Egypt's relations with Israel. Border issues were off-limits. So was heavy metal mu-

sic, thought to be a pact with the devil. Particular turns of phrase also were no-nos: "iron-fisted," for example, when used to describe the president, since any criticism of him could land you in jail. I quickly learned the ropes and the bounds, and I inadvertently, not conscious of the act itself, learned to self-censor, too.

This, in many ways, was the beginning of what would become a growing space of silence in my writing life, which slowly extended beyond politics. Over the years, I developed a habit of sidestepping or writing in innuendo anything that I thought might be culturally offensive, exposing, taboo.

In the fall of 2010, the year before the revolution that ousted President Hosni Mubarak, I was part of a small team of writers and editors that founded the online news site Ahram Online. It was partly funded by the state and under the umbrella of the government daily Al Ahram. But our editor, Hani Shukrallah, was a liberal and a leftist — a fierce defender of press freedoms and human rights, who encouraged us to push boundaries.

After that year's particularly contentious parliamentary election, during which Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party

hired thugs to beat up dissident candidates, we ran an article with the headline "Blow by Blow Account."

Shukrallah almost immediately got a phone call from the chairman of Al Ahram.

He came out of his office and grudgingly told us that the headline had to go. We changed it to "Minute by Minute Account." We also chopped off the last paragraph of an article I was writing because it mentioned the president's younger son, Gamal, who was angling for power in a standoff with the army. This type of censorship, slight in many ways, severe in others, had become a mode of survival; one picked one's battles.

Still, it was only for a fleeting moment in 2011, in the early days of the uprising — before any clear division between factions had become apparent — that my notebook felt like a liability: I was stopped several times on the street by police officers who were suspicious of my note-taking and interrogated me about my affiliation and intentions.

In all my years of writing, it had always been clear what could and what couldn't be addressed, even when the difference between those things shifted as the political story changed. There



Hosni Mubarak regime controlled press in Egypt with very limited freedom for journalists

was still a margin for challenging the status quo, to subtly suggest what could not be said — that was mostly a matter of timing and venue. Writing in English, one had more leeway. Sometimes journalists were jailed and people disappeared, but such perils didn't loom over the everyday or

anyone I personally knew.

The present, in this broader historical context, feels novel. In the space of a single day in April, three journalists were detained. Over the whole year the number is thought to be 38. Others have disappeared. The crackdown now also extends be-