

## The Champions Revolution on the run

Seoud, the fastest man in the Middle East, runs towards Beijing and then London. But stops off in Tahrir Square, dreaming of revolution and democracy.

by Matteo Patrono



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On 25 January 2011, Amr Ibrahim Mostafa Seoud was one of the first children of the revolution to reach Tahrir Square. By taxi. A friend had invited him through Facebook to join a protest demonstration against police brutality and special laws that allowed people to be held in custody indefinitely without a trial. It happened to be National Police Day.

Seoud has somewhat of an aversion to men in uniform: he's been stopped countless times, searched and had his money taken. He once even got into a fight with them, and if it hadn't been for his trainer he would have ended up in jail.

Seoud, aged 24, is an athlete, the fastest man in Egypt and the entire African continent. In 2008 he competed in a 200 metre heat against Usain Bolt at the Beijing Olympics. The reason he was among the first to 'sprint' to Tahrir Square is different, however. "I wanted to shout my desire for freedom, against a system operating well below any kind of legal standards, in fact against the law, cheating its people", he says. "I found

thousands of young people there who, like me, wanted to fix this damned system. Hope is contagious and in a few days there were millions of us".

In the square that became a symbol of the political tsunami that was to swamp the whole of North Africa, Seoud bumped into the militant fans of the capital's two main football teams, Al Ahly and Zamalek, in the front line against the Mubarak regime for years. They were the only ones to blatantly challenge the last of the pharaohs; these fans now brought the demonstrations to the streets, protests that up until then had always been confined to the sanitised precincts of the football stadium.

Al Ahly is the club supported by common people, by the Muslim Brotherhood and Cairo's working class. Whereas Zamalek is the team of the bourgeoisie and intellectuals. Divided by a long-standing and violent rivalry, they stood united in Tahrir Square. Seoud has a brother who used to play for Zamalek. His family comes from Damietta, a port town that was the site of furious battles during the Crusades due to its strategic position providing control over the Nile.

During those terrible yet enthralling days, Seoud decided to sideline athletics and his career. He embraced the protest and tried to lend a hand organising security in his district because everyone expected some kind of reaction from the

police. It came in the form of an ambulance loaded with loyalists and soldiers. When bullets started raining down, he was sitting on the roof of a car chatting with a friend. He dove for cover and when he picked himself up the other guy was lying on the ground, dead. "It was their way of intimidating us, ordering us to go back home, to give up. But everyone had suddenly opened their eyes and realised that this time they had to join us protesters".

Seoud stayed on the streets, witnessed Mubarak's fall and returned to the track in May, just a few months before the world championships in Daegu. The Egyptian athletics federation paid for his ticket to go and train in Colorado, that's all it could afford. An emir offered him a huge sum of money to compete at the 2012 London Olympic Games for a new country, but the sprinter refused, explaining: "They kept telling me 'We've got money and sponsors you'll never have in Egypt, what with the revolution you've had and all'. I chose to stay in Egypt because this is where my roots and my history are, and I wanted the opportunity for a return match".

In 2006, already a bronze medal winner at the Francophone Games in Niamey, his name was erased from Egyptian sport. Because he had contracted malaria during a competition in Niger. A government official accused

him of using drugs and being about to sell out to Morocco and the Egyptian Federation left him to his own devices. So Seoud opened a mobile phone shop in Cairo, enrolled in a Business Administration course and continued to train on his own. A year later he was Egyptian champion and a gold medallist in the men's 200 metres at the Bangkok University Games, his passport to the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing.

In China Seoud witnessed the birth of the Bolt legend. He ran his qualifier against the Jamaican, lowered his own record time to 20.55 seconds and set his sights on trying again.

By the time the London Olympics came along his life had changed completely. He had just experienced an epoch-changing revolution, which had created enormous social expectations in the Arab world and triggered even greater political instability. There were no funds for sport, training for the Olympics was an obstacle race in itself but the children of the Arab Spring who were carried to London on the winds of history were welcomed with open arms by the Olympic organisation in Britain. Seoud and his brothers and sisters: young, cosmopolitan, technologically savvy and subversive. Like Yemenite judo champion, Ali Khousof, who was shot in the stomach during the revolt against Ali Abdullah Saleh's dictatorship. Or Tunisian gymnast Wajdi Bouallègue, who had been disqualified for life in 2009 for ripping down a poster of president Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali. Or Wojdan Ali Seraj Abdulrahim Shahrkhani and Sarah Attar, the first female Saudi Arabian Olympians in the history of the games. Games of change and counter-power.

In London, Amr Seoud was once again



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caught in the slip stream of the Jamaican sprint god, this time in the men's 100m heats: just 13-thenths of a second between them (10.09 against 10.22), with Bolt headed for legend and Seoud headed home. He fared no better in the 200m, where he was eliminated with his worst time of the year. No matter, other thoughts were whirling around in the young man's head. The Arab Spring on the track can wait. "We've waited for decades, we can wait a little longer", he says. "In Egypt we need to train doctors, scientists, teachers, politicians and honest administrators. We have to help the poor leave poverty behind them. Sport is great but there are more important things in life. We'll see each other in Rio de Janeiro in 2016, when the whole of Arab society will be freer and more up-to-date. We'll have our sporting revolution there".

Two years after Tahrir Square, Egypt's fastest sprinter is now living and training

**Istanbul, World Indoor Athletics Championships at the Istanbul Arena, 9th of March 2012. Amr Ibrahim Mostafa Seoud competes with the Egyptian colours despite many proposals to change flag.**

in Cairo again. The revolution has spawned the Mohamed Morsi government, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood, the army's attempted coups. The liberal front that had inspired the revolt has split but even so managed to once again fill the streets in protest at the fundamentalist Islamification of the country. Seoud's earlier enthusiasm has perhaps been replaced by a little disenchantment and the conviction that there are no shortcuts or fast tracks to full-blown democracy. "When Mubarak fell, we believed we were on the brink of a better future. What we have learned is that other forces were already at work to sidetrack the revolution. We were naive, but rest assured, we'll get there sooner or later", he assures us. **E**