

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

OP-ED

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“Brother Lamri. They are going to execute us. Please get in touch.”

This was the SMS that flashed up on the mobile phone of Amnesty International's Yemen researcher at its London headquarters on a Monday morning in October 2007. It was sent by Hafez Ibrahim, hours away from a death sentence in a Yemeni prison after being convicted without appeal for a killing committed when he was a child aged 16.

What followed was a flurry of emails, faxes and text messages to Amnesty International supporters around the world, to media, to local activists and to the President of Yemen himself. He responded with a stay of execution but no pardon and it took many more months of campaigning to secure Hafez's release. He went on to study law and last year expressed his determination to make the most of the life that was returned to him. “I owe my life to Amnesty International”, he said. “Now I am dedicating that life to campaigning against the death penalty and raising awareness about human rights.”

For 50 years Amnesty International has shown that determined individuals joining together with other individuals and using the most effective technology available can be incredibly powerful defenders of justice and promoters of freedom.

Today as we mark our 50th anniversary, the ordinary people taking to the streets in the Arab Spring are a living testament to the same dream. Whether it be 27-year-old Asmaa Mahfouz, who helped spark the Egyptian revolution with her video blog posted one week before the uprising or cyber activist Jamal al-Hajji, one of the first to call for demonstrations in support of greater freedoms in Libya – the power of the individual has never been clearer.

In some ways the unfolding drama of the Arab Spring mirrors Amnesty's own journey. This extraordinary social movement was born in 1961 when one London lawyer by the name of Peter Benenson transformed a personal protest into something more, by urging others to join him in “righteous indignation” and disgust at brutality and injustice.

Outraged by the tale of two Portuguese students imprisoned for drinking a toast to liberty during the dark days of the Salazar regime, he came up with an idea that was as simple as it was original - a network of individuals that would write letters to other individuals and to the governments that were imprisoning them simply for their beliefs – people he defined as “Prisoners of Conscience.”

Amnesty International was in effect one of the world's first social networks although few recognised it at the time. Indeed, the idea that letter writing could be an effective way of bringing people together in common action was as challenged in its day as the idea that wall posts, tweets and downloading YouTube videos are today.

Perhaps all the more remarkable was Benenson's commitment to impartiality, independence and the human experience, above the political. Amnesty International was launched just months before the Cold War ideological division was to reach its symbolic apex with the construction of the Berlin Wall. Yet Benenson wrote, "The force of opinion, to be effective, should be broadly based, international, non-sectarian and all-party."

Described shortly afterwards as one of the "larger lunacies of our time", the principles and practices on which Amnesty International was founded is probably a "lunacy" that many of today's young Arab protesters might recognise and embrace. Their struggle for human rights has also been the struggle of individuals joining together, often without leaders and ungoverned by traditional political or religious ideologies.

50 years since Amnesty International was born to protect the rights of those detained simply for their opinions there has been a human rights revolution, a massive cultural, social and political shift that has transformed the call for justice, freedom and dignity into a truly global demand.

Amnesty International has become the world's largest human rights organisation but, as the Arab Spring reminds us today, as other activists across the world have throughout our 50 years, the communities most affected by human rights abuses are the real driving force behind this revolution.

Human rights violations are very much at the heart of key challenges facing today's changing world. While brave and determined individuals claim their rights and freedoms, governments, armed groups, corporations and international institutions continue to seek to evade scrutiny and accountability.

That is why in our 50th anniversary year we are focusing on six areas where people power can help tip the scales against repression and injustice: freedom of expression, abolition of the death penalty, reproductive rights for women and girls, ensuring international justice, corporate accountability and ending injustice and oppression in the Middle East and North Africa.

But above all, this anniversary is a moment to imagine how much individuals working together can achieve. That is why we are asking everyone, in particular Amnesty International's three million members worldwide to "Be one more, ask one more, act once more" – to each ask one more person to take action.

50 years of standing up to tyranny and injustice has shown that every individual can make a difference. But whether it is writing letters or blogs, sending emails or texts, demonstrating or uploading videos, 2011 has reminded us all that millions of individuals standing together and uniting against injustice can change the world.