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The Arab Uprisings: Revolution or Protests?

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Recent years have seen a surge in radical protest, from Occupy Wall Street to Indian Naxalites, from North African youth to Chilean teachers, and from Muslims in Xinjiang to indigenous peoples in the Pacific. The uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa during 2011 provide the most potent articulation of these multiple sites of protest.

In carrying out an assessment of the Arab uprisings, it is worth recalling that very few such movements lead to successful revolutions. Crucial to revolutionary success are three factors: first, levels of state effectiveness (in particular, the resilience of intermediary institutions which can channel grievances between state and society); second, the degree of elite fracture (particularly its hold over the coercive apparatus); and third, the commitment of the opposition (both in terms of its ideological unity and its organisational capacity). Although the first two of these factors have remained consistent features of revolutionary movements over time, the third has changed markedly. In particular, there appears to be little adhesive within contemporary revolutionary ideologies that can act as the binding agent of a new social order. This means that, for all the amendable conditions for revolution today, and for all the willing capacity of many movements to demand radical change, there is little sense of what an alternative order would look like once such processes have taken place. This too is the case with the 2011 uprisings.

On the one hand, therefore, there is considerable scope in the contemporary world for revolutionary challenges to occur. On the other hand, many of the movements that promote radical change lack a sense of how social relations could – and should – be re-ordered. These issues form the background to any assessment of how the 2011 Arab uprisings emerged, how they are developing, and what their outcomes are likely to be.

NEGOTIATED REVOLUTIONS 2.0?

The Arab uprisings sit downwind from the 'negotiated revolutions' that accompanied the end of the Cold War in 1989. Negotiated revolutions shifted the meaning and character of revolution in two main ways: first, because negotiated revolutions were rooted in movements for political justice rather than driven by programmes of economic and social transformation, they sought to limit rather than extend state power; second, because both sides of the struggle sought recourse via negotiation rather than armed conflict, non-violence became their dominant trope. The result of these dynamics was that negotiated revolutions strengthened rather than challenged liberal international order.

In the aftermath of the Cold War, it was easy to see the appeal of negotiated revolutions. Uprisings in Serbia, Georgia, Ukraine, and elsewhere chimed with the spread of liberal international order. It was, therefore, little surprise that the 2011 Arab uprisings shared considerable overlaps with negotiated revolutions, including the promotion of non-violent protest, an ethos of democratisation, and a transformation rooted in negotiation rather than military victory.

However, the Arab uprisings also led to discussions over whether a further amendment to revolutionary anatomies was being constructed, particularly when it came to the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. Do the Arab uprisings represent a shift in the anatomies of revolution, perhaps marking the advent of negotiated revolutions 2.0?

REVOLUTIONARY SITUATIONS

Before examining the role played by ICTs in the Arab uprisings, it is worth exploring the basic causes of the uprisings themselves. Although the uprisings were surprising, they were not out of keeping with the revolutionary pathways associated with negotiated revolutions. First, there was a weakening of state effectiveness. For example, in Egypt, the strong links between the elite, the United States and Israel were deeply unpopular amongst the general public. In the years leading up to the Arab uprisings, Egypt was the second largest recipient of US aid (worth around $1 billion dollars each year in military aid alone), one of the main sites for the torture and rendition of suspected Al-Qaeda suspects, and a supporter of Israeli policies in the region, including the blockade of Gaza. Such policies generated a sense of distance between the regime and the people.

Most important, however, in the weakening of state effectiveness was the legacy and evolution of the 'revolutions from above' which these states experienced during the 1950s and 1960s. During the 'revolutions from above', an 'independent force' of high ranking military officials and civilian bureaucrats seized power, using the state as a means by which to carry out projects of social transformation. For many years, these regimes appeared stable, so much so that much academic debate revolved around the resilience of authoritarianism in the Middle East.

However, Middle Eastern states proved as vulnerable to revolution from below as the regimes they replaced were vulnerable to revolution from above. The lack of intermediate associations between state and society meant that there were few effective channels by which to meet grievances and institutionalise contestation.

This served to 'hollow out' state-society relations, making regimes vulnerable to surges of discontent. States in the region could subjugate their people, but they lacked the institutional depth to regulate society efficiently. It was just these weaknesses which enabled revolutionary pressures to emerge during 2011.

Egypt serves as a useful illustration of these dynamics. Before the 2011 revolution, the legitimacy of the Egyptian state rested on three main pillars: the 1952 revolution; the role of the military in freeing Egypt from Western hegemony (the nationalisation and subsequent conflict over Suez being the most pertinent example); and the 'socialist development' policies pursued by Nasser, during which the state took over the planning, coordination, investment, and management of production.

As Toby Dodge points out in his Introduction to this report, these policies had the effect of demobilising social forces, including private landholders and the bourgeoisie, by using land reform and industrialisation as tools for exerting state authority over economic activities. They also led to reasonable levels of state-led growth, fortified by price subsidies which made basic commodities affordable to the majority of the population. State income was further generated through petrodollars and aid, particularly from the US, which paid handsomely in exchange for Egypt's recognition of Israel following the 1978 Camp David Accords, its opposition to Iran, the suppression of Islamists (including the execution of Sayyid Qutb – the 'Islamist Lenin'), and the regular passage of US warships through the Suez Canal.

The Egyptian state was, therefore, secured through an amalgam of state-led development and redistributive mechanisms. However, under Sadat and Mubarak, this legitimacy was eroded as the state came to be characterised more by repression than by popular mandate. Both Sadat (in 1977) and Mubarak (in 1986) deployed the army against domestic protestors. And after the assassination of Sadat by members of al-Jihad in 1981, emergency laws made the state an everyday presence in people's lives. A vast security establishment was constructed on the back of two million informants, who underpinned an extensive system of policing, state security, and state-sponsored gangs (*baltagiya*).

Even as Mubarak increased the despotic power of the state, he reduced its infrastructural reach through a range of neoliberal reforms. During the 1980s and 1990s, Egypt reduced tariffs, abandoned interest rate controls, and removed import quotas. This served to intensify state dependence on oil rents and foreign aid, making the Egyptian economy more susceptible to external dynamics. A dip in oil prices during the mid-1990s forced the state to further leverage its debt and reduce public expenditure. The subsequent austerity measures prompted a decline in living standards for many people, even as a 'network of privilege' (many of whom were associated with Gamal Mubarak, the President's son), used personal connections with state brokers in order to secure lucrative contracts. Increasingly, this elite came to be seen as a minority caste operating outside, or on top of, civil society.

Concurrent with these dynamics, demographic changes (particularly population growth) placed additional burdens on the state. By 2011, over one-third of the Egyptian population was aged 15-29. This exerted considerable pressures on job markets, just as the state was becoming more neoliberal, more personalistic, and more repressive. In 2009, unemployment in the region reached nearly 25 percent, twice the global average. It was much higher than this amongst young people and disproportionately felt within the middle class – college graduates in Egypt were ten times more likely to have no job as those with a primary school education.

Short-term triggers added to the sense of state failure. Between 2008 and 2010, food prices increased by over a third. The removal of food subsidies by the state (the bread subsidy alone cost $3 billion per year to maintain) fuelled resentment against the regime. Despite the decline in its economic sovereignty after two decades or more of neoliberal reforms, the legitimacy of the Egyptian state was tightly bound with its capacity to deliver a basic standard of living. It was, therefore, particularly susceptible to such a crisis, particularly when it seemed to many Egyptians that the state had abandoned the poor for the sake of the rich.

Despite this vulnerability, the Egyptian regime was slow to respond to the threat posed by the December 2010

protests in Tunisia. Already under pressure following allegations of vote-rigging in the November 2010 parliamentary elections, Mubarak did not react to the escalation of protests in the early part of 2011, even after Tunisian President Ben Ali resigned in mid-January. As protests intensified, Mubarak's hold on power weakened. The President promised to resign at the end of his term of office, while simultaneously ordering an escalation of violence against protestors. This combination of carrot and stick backfired, sapping Mubarak's support within the police, his party, and the military. Large numbers of police failed to show up for work, took off their badges, or went over to the protestors. On February 5, the executive committee of the National Democratic Party resigned en masse. And as the protests escalated, the military, which had previously been cautiously neutral, first moved in to protect the protestors from state-sponsored violence and then, on February 10, publicly endorsed the people's 'legitimate demands'. Mubarak resigned the next day.

The events leading up to the formation of a revolutionary situation in Egypt sit well within existing understandings of revolution:

■ First, state effectiveness was weakened both through long-term dynamics (the closeness of elite ties to the United States and Israel, deepening inequalities between rich and poor, and the everyday brutality of the security apparatus) and short-term pressures (the spike in food prices, the 2010 rigged elections, and the protests in Tunisia).

■ Second, Mubarak's position was damaged by elite fracture, particularly within the coercive apparatus. The most important source of defection was the military – without their support, Mubarak's position was untenable.

■ Third, the state was undermined by the resourcefulness of the opposition. The coalition that formed against Mubarak was made up of disparate forces: labour groups, urban youths, mosques, professionals, and the Muslim Brotherhood. At the same time, 'revolutionary entrepreneurs' connected opposition networks into a coherent coalition. These 'wired cosmopolitans', mostly young, well-travelled, technologically-savvy professionals, 'translated' local

events for foreign media, establishing media centres which spread the revolutionary message through cell phones, YouTube, and Twitter. They also used ICTs to establish safety committees and other such bodies. Did the use of such technologies denote a shift in how revolutions unfold?

REVOLUTIONARY TRAJECTORIES

One of the central features of revolutions is the formation of a close-knit oppositional identity centred on shared 'stories' which unite disparate groups behind a common cause. Eric Selbin describes the function of these stories as 'tools of connection' between everyday life and collective protest. During the Arab Spring, it is argued, ICTs served as these 'tools of connection', providing a means by which protest was organised and resistance was mobilised. Because ICT networks are meritocratic, informal, horizontal, and transparent, they are, it is argued, necessarily anti-authoritarian. And by sharing information both immediately and without official sanction, ICTs are said to foster a new type of politics, one which was indispensable to the Arab uprisings.

When and how do ICTs influence revolutions? Once again, it is worth examining the case of Egypt. There is little doubt that Facebook played some role in organising protests in Egypt. The Facebook group ('We Are All Khaled Said'), established in commemoration of a blogger who was murdered by Egyptian police in 2010, gathered hundreds of thousands of members, many of whom took part in anti-regime demonstrations. This group also acted as a connecting node between domestic and transnational networks, helping to ratchet up pressure on elites around the world to 'do something'.

Such dynamics worried Arab states. At the end of January, the Egyptian government required the country's four main Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to disable their networks. All four ISPs, with the exception of Noor, the provider for the Egyptian Stock Exchange, complied. After five days, however, the government lifted its blockade, as it came to regard the ban as igniting rather than suppressing dissent.

In other words, more people came onto the streets once the Internet had been disabled. This is a puzzling outcome given claims about the necessity of ICTs in mobilising protest. Protestors are supposed to have required ICTs in order to connect disparate networks and coordinate activities. Yet protests in Egypt intensified during the period in which the Internet was disabled.

Perhaps, though, this is not such a puzzle. As even the most enthusiastic cyber-utopians accept, digital data leaves an audit trail, one which can be used for surveillance and censorship as well as for decentralisation and transparency. Social media is a tool which has been appropriated by authoritarian governments in order to trace protestors, spread propaganda, and monitor the activities of protest groups. Indeed, this is something which many activists themselves appear to recognise. For example, in January 2011, a pamphlet, entitled 'How to Protest Intelligently', was circulated widely amongst protest groups in Egypt. The pamphlet explicitly asked protestors not to use Twitter, Facebook, YouTube or other websites because, 'they are all monitored by the Ministry of the Interior'.

Examples elsewhere bolster this point. After the 2009 uprising, the Iranian government formed a cybercrime unit charged with countering the 'American led cyber-war' and arresting those guilty of spreading 'insults and lies' about the regime through the Internet. The Chinese government regularly interferes with the working of the Internet and email accounts, and has become adept at initiating 'online blockades', particularly around the unrest in Xinjiang. At the same time, the Internet has proved to be a valuable source of authoritarian propaganda. Vladimir Putin's United Russia party, for example, enjoys an extensive online presence, while Hugo Chavez is an accomplished user of Twitter, sending out regular missives to his two million plus followers. In short, authoritarian regimes are skilled practitioners when it comes to adopting 'networked' techniques of surveillance and control.

On the one hand, then, ICTs can help to coordinate revolutionary protests. On the other, they can equally well be used to disrupt these protests. In short, ICTs have no independent agency – they are

tools which operate within broader circuits of power. As Malcolm Gladwell has pointed out, ICTs are good at generating 'weak ties' – networks of acquaintances which 'like' or 'share' the same tastes. But they are poor at fostering 'strong ties' – the deep connections of solidarity and commitment which undergird collective protest. This latter form of connection, best rooted in personal ties of family and friendship, or in the midst of struggle, is not easily forged. To the contrary, it costs. And it is not something that ICTs do well.

REVOLUTIONARY OUTCOMES

What, then, are the likely outcomes of the Arab uprisings? In many ways, it is too early to tell. If the minimum condition of revolutionary outcomes is the period in which a revolutionary regime takes control of the principal means of production, means of violence, and means of information in a society, only one state has reached this point. Tunisia has overthrown its former regime, held free and fair elections, and handed power over to a new civilian authority. However, as detailed elsewhere in this report, Tunisia's revolution is by no means complete.

Nonetheless, Tunisia is an island of relative tranquillity in an otherwise turbulent sea. In Egypt, the SCAF remains in charge, albeit in uneasy truce with Islamist forces. Bahrain's uprising was crushed by a combination of monarchical obduracy and Saudi force. The Saudi's themselves only mollified domestic unrest through a reform package worth over $150 billion. This strategy, on a lesser scale, was also initiated in Kuwait, Morocco, and Jordan, with similar results: the decompression of protest. In other states, instability remains the main consequence of the uprisings – varying degrees of civil strife besets Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

Overall, therefore, none of the states in the region bar Tunisia meet even the minimum criteria of revolutionary success, let alone their 'maximum condition' – the institutionalisation of a new political, economic, and symbolic order. Although there is increasing talk of a 'Turkish' or 'Indonesian model' which combines 'a pious society within a democratic state', the region as a whole is stuck between fragile pacts, illiberal renewal, and unmet grievances.

BACK TO THE FUTURE OF REVOLUTION

As noted above, the lack of systemic transformation wrought by the Arab uprisings is something common to many contemporary revolutions. This is because the meaning and character of revolution itself has changed, becoming increasingly oriented around political representation rather than the reordering of society. As such, revolutions have become deliberately self-limiting, seeking to restrain revolutionary excess within constitutional limits.

This shift away from revolutions as processes of social transformation is not wholly new. It speaks to a genealogy which runs through America in 1776, the Springtime of Nations in 1848, and the negotiated revolutions in 1989. These self-limiting revolutions centre on individual rather than collective emancipation, seeing the latter as a cloak for revolutionary despotism. The 2011 Arab uprisings sit within this alternative tradition of revolution.

Mike Davis makes an arresting comparison in this regard, examining parallels between the protagonists in 2011 and 1848: Egypt and France as the 'revolutionary vanguards'; Saudi Arabia and Russia as the 'counter-revolutionary powers'; Turkey and England as the 'models of success'; Palestine and Poland as the 'romantic lost causes'; and Serbia and Shia groups as the 'angry outsiders'. As Davis, following Marx, also notes, no revolution in Europe, whether liberal or socialist, could succeed until Russia was either defeated or revolutionised. The same may be true of Saudi Arabia in its region. It is also worth noting that, although the revolutions of 1848 were defeated in the short-term, their main rationale of political liberalisation was successful in the long run. That too may be the case with the 2011 Arab uprisings.∎