



Middle East
Centre



SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND
POPULAR MOBILISATION
IN THE MENA



POLITICAL ECONOMY
AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT
THEORY PERSPECTIVES
ON THE TUNISIAN AND
EGYPTIAN POPULAR
UPRISINGS OF 2011

JOEL BEININ

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POLITICAL ECONOMY AND SOCIAL MOVEMENT
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AND EGYPTIAN POPULAR UPRISINGS OF 2011

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Abstract

Workers' movements contributed substantially to the 2011 popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Bahrain. Comparing the role of workers before, during and after the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt demonstrates that the relatively successful installation of a procedural democracy in Tunisia owes a great deal to the movements of workers and the unemployed in the uprisings and to their organisational structure and political horizon. Tunisian workers could compel the Tunisian General Federation of Labor (UGTT), despite the wishes of its pro-Ben Ali national leadership, to join them and the rest of the Tunisian people in a struggle against autocracy. Egyptian workers, on the other hand, were not able to force the Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) to support the uprising and had no national organisations and only weak links to intellectuals.

Introduction

The Arab uprisings of 2011 challenged much of the conventional wisdom about the region. They were preceded by over a decade of workers' movements, mobilisations for human rights, women's rights and democracy, and protests against US foreign policy. Despite the disappointing balance sheet of the uprisings to date, the notion that either Arab/Muslim culture or petroleum inherently disposes the region towards autocracy should be eliminated from intelligent discourse. We need more substantial explanations of the uprisings and the dynamics of political contestation against authoritarian Arab regimes. Workers' movements contributed substantially to the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Bahrain. Here I examine the cases of Tunisia and Egypt to argue that the relatively successful installation of a procedural democracy in the former owes a great deal to the movements of workers and the unemployed in the uprisings and to their organisational structure and political horizon.

For workers and the unemployed, the uprisings were more than a movement to reclaim human dignity against autocracy. Their concerns were expressed in the slogan first raised during the 2008 rebellion in Tunisia's phosphate mining basin: 'A job is a right, you pack of thieves!' (*al-Tashghil istihqaq, ya 'usabat al-siraq*) and then again in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010 following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi. The import of that slogan reached Egypt's Tahrir Square and from there spread across the Arab world as 'Bread, Freedom, Social Justice' (*al-'Aysh, wal-hurriya, wal-'adala al-igti-ma'iyya* in its Egyptian colloquial form).

I mean by 'workers' a social category historically forged by a matrix of regional, national, and international economic, political, social, and cultural relationships. It does not signify a fixed or immutable identity, a specific form of consciousness, and certainly not a pre-determined historical trajectory. Those included in the popular imagination of the working class, the relationships among its various sectors, and previous histories of struggle are important elements among the many determinations of workers' organisational and political capacities.

Workers' mobilisations before and during the uprisings to oust the autocrats, which are continuing to this day in Tunisia and Egypt, are an extension of decades of struggles against the efforts of the US government and the international financial institutions to impose a new regime of capital accumulation on the region, regulated by the policy prescriptions of the neoliberal Washington Consensus.¹ Those policies led to: negligible or negative effects on poverty rates; declining real wages; high rates of unemployment concentrated among those with a tertiary education, among them young women; the early retirement of hundreds of thousands of blue- and white-collar public sector workers; and casualisation of an increasing proportion of those remaining at work, leaving them without job security, unemployment insurance, health care, pensions, or union membership.

¹ This is the set of 10 policies that the US government and the international financial institutions based in the US capital believed were necessary elements of 'first stage policy reform' that all countries should adopt to increase economic growth. World Health Organisation, <http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story094/en/>

Egyptian and Tunisian public sector workers began resisting privatisation of their workplaces and erosion of the authoritarian bargains consolidated in the eras of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1952-70) and Habib Bourguiba (1956-87) as early as the 1970s. In January 1977, in response to sharp cuts in subsidies of consumer commodities, workers in suburban Cairo and Alexandria initiated one of the first of the 146 '[International Monetary Fund] IMF food riots' that erupted throughout the global South from 1976 to 1992.² The UGTT called a general strike over wages and prices in 1978. Widespread anti-IMF rioting in 1983-84 that began in the marginalised southern and western regions of Tunisia reprised the Egyptian events of 1977. The sedimentation of the experiences of such struggles formed an important resource for the 2011 popular uprisings. But their effects were radically different in Egypt and Tunisia, in part due to the histories of their national trade union federations and other organisations in the labour ambit.

The Egyptian Trade Union Federation (ETUF) was an arm of the state since its inception in 1957. It resolutely opposed mobilisations of workers, and by the 2000s, tolerated no space for dissidents. Only two NGOs – the Centre for Trade Union and Workers Services (established in 1990) and the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights (established in 2010, but preceded by monthly meetings of trade union activists for a decade) sought to represent workers' interests in the last decade of Mubarak's rule. Consequently, the Egyptian experiences were not organisationally or politically consolidated.

In contrast, the Tunisian General Federation of Labor (UGTT) maintained an always-contested degree of autonomy from the state and its successive ruling parties. This was largely due to its unassailable historic legitimacy as the most important social base of the nationalist movement and the 'martyrdom' of its founder, Farhat Hached, who was assassinated by a French secret service agent in 1952. Although they both repressed and co-opted the UGTT's peak leadership, if Bourguiba and Ben Ali did not wish to rule by force alone, they were compelled to permit UGTT leaders to tolerate debate, disagreement and occasional militancy in order to retain sufficient credibility with their members to restrain more expansive demands. Consequently the UGTT was neither 'totally submissive [n]or totally aligned'. It comprised an 'unstable cohabitation between a neutralized leadership and an uncontrolled base'.³

The unemployed, and especially university graduates among them, do not belong to the working class. But they are children of the working class. Many were able to go to university because their families benefitted from the social welfare policies of post-colonial states. In Tunisia in the 2000s, campaigns of unemployed degree holders demanding jobs were often allied with the workers' demands. Activists of the Union de Diplômés Chômeurs (UDC) along with mid-level UGTT leaders were key organisers of many struggles over wages, working conditions, marginalisation of the interior regions, and lack of employment opportunities. In Egypt, the lack of opportunities for unemployed degree holders was among the social tensions leading to the popular uprising of 2011. But unemployed degree holders have no organisation and therefore no political leverage.

² John Walton and David Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment* (Oxford UK and Cambridge USA: Blackwell, 1994), pp. 39-40.

³ Béatrice Hibou, *The Force of Obedience: The Political Economy of Repression in Tunisia* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2011), p. 127.

Social Movement Theory Applied

A modest version of Social Movement Theory (SMT) suggests that, rather than a structuralist or nomothetic theory, it is an ‘orienting device’.⁴ Studies of the Arab world employing SMT have mostly used Islamic movements as case studies to validate its classical and more structuralist concepts of *political opportunity structure*, *collective action frames*, *mobilising structures* and *repertoires of contention*.⁵ This has a certain value in demonstrating the rationality of Islamic social and political action. But passive consumption of theory produced in other contexts can ultimately be misleading. Theoretical concepts and structural categories have no transhistorical essence and should always be problematised, disaggregated, localised and contextualised.

In *Dynamics of Contention*, the leading lights in the development of SMT’s classical concepts – Doug McAdam, Sydney Tarrow and the late Charles Tilly – self-critically discuss the limits of these concepts.⁶ Instead, they propose a ‘relational’ perspective, which makes ‘interpersonal networks’ central to mobilisation processes. It emphasises challengers’ ‘perceptions of opportunities and threats’; ‘active appropriation of sites for mobilization’ rather than preexisting structures; dynamic construction of collective action frames; innovation in repertoires of contention; description and analysis of ‘contentious performances’ rather than stable repertoires of collective action and a broad processual understanding of mobilisation rather than a search for the precise origins of contentious episodes. This more dynamic and more historical version of SMT, perhaps because it is more difficult to apply and requires extensive ethnographic investigation, has had little impact on the study of social movements in the Arab region. I employ it as an ‘orienting device’ to understanding the dynamics of Arab workers’ movements – how they form and sustain themselves, their repertoires of contention and their political horizons.

The Arab uprisings emerged from the interstices of persisting authoritarianisms that offered highly restricted or uncertain ‘political opportunities’ or openings. Social movements and mobilisations typically had very limited resources to mobilise and weak formal organisations and relied on informal networks and innovative repertoires. Because of their weakness in relation to entrenched regimes, direct confrontations, especially of a national-political nature, were rare and often motivated by a perceived collective threat rather than an ‘opportunity’.

⁴ The term is from Charles Tilly, ‘Forward’, in *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*, ed. Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), p. xi.

⁵ Among the better examples are Quintan Wiktorowicz, *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Approach* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Janine A. Clark, *Islam, Charity, and Activism: Middle-Class Networks and Social Welfare in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *Mobilizing Islam: Religion, Activism, and Political Change in Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). and Jenny B. White, *Islamist Mobilization in Turkey: A Study in Vernacular Politics* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002), though still limited to Islamic movements, develop conceptual categories appropriate to Egyptian and Turkish specificities, but with wider implications.

⁶ Doug McAdam, Sidney G. Tarrow, and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 22, 41-50.

Jeffrey Broadbent emphasises the ‘thick networks’ of social relations that enabled the mobilisation of Japan’s environmental protest movement, noting that, ‘the final necessary ingredient was a protest leader from within the community who enjoyed high status there’.⁷ Focusing on ‘the *social* aspect of power’ – the contexts of networks and the power relations they embody – overcomes the unsatisfactory options of individual rationality based on material factors or subjective, culturalist factors, like Japan’s supposed ‘deferential political culture’ (or the ‘Arab propensity for authoritarianism’) as competing explanations of mobilisation.

Informal networks were key mechanisms for mobilising the Egyptian oppositional intelligentsia in several campaigns in the decade before President Hosni Mubarak’s demise. The absence of a high-status, consensual leader and the narrow ambit of those informal networks, in addition to repression, explain why they were sporadic episodes. Workers’ informal networks in the same period were more durable and less susceptible to regime penetration than those of the intelligentsia. However, workers often sought to co-opt rather than openly contest the regime’s power, for example, by calling on Mubarak or a government representative to visit them and hear their grievances. Workers did not form national organisations or pursue ‘democratisation’ as a strategic objective.

Workers’ Collective Actions in the Lead up to the Uprisings

The Case of Egypt

From 1998 to 2010 over 2 million (and probably closer to 4 million) Egyptian workers participated in more than 3,300 strikes, sit-ins, and other collective actions. Their most common demands related to job security, non-fulfillment of contractual obligations before or after privatisation of a public sector firm, and delayed or reduced payment of fringe benefits, bonuses, or profit shares in both public and private sector firms. These contestations fit Tilly and Tarrow’s definition of a social movement: ‘a sustained campaign of claim making, using repeated performances that advertise the claim, based on organizations, networks, traditions, and solidarities that sustain these activities’.⁸ However, contrary to McAdam, McCarthy and Zald’s assertion, it was not necessary and, in fact, impossible to ‘create an enduring organizational structure to sustain collective action’.⁹

Collective actions spiked sharply after the installation of Prime Minister Ahmad Nazif and his ‘government of businessmen’ in July 2004. Nazif’s remit was to accelerate the privatisation of Egypt’s public sector and the liberalisation of the economy in accord

⁷ Jeffrey Broadbent, ‘Movement in Context: Thick Networks and Japanese Environmental Protest’, in *Social Movements and Networks: Relational Approaches to Collective Action*, eds. Mario Diani and Doug McAdam (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 225.

⁸ Charles Tilly and Sidney G. Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2007), p. 8.

⁹ Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 13.

with the Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program negotiated with the IMF and World Bank in 1991. He was largely successful and won high praise from the international financial institutions. Workers were less pleased. There were 265 collective actions in 2004 – more than double the 1998-2003 average; over 70% (190) of them occurred after the Nazif government took office in July.

By 2006 the largest and most sustained social movement in Egypt since the campaign to oust the British occupiers after World War II was clearly underway. Blue-collar workers in the declining public sector textile industry, which was threatened by competition from low-wage south and south-east Asian producers, comprised the centre of gravity of these contestations. In 2002 Egypt began creating various special economic zones offering concessions to encourage domestic and foreign direct investment. Many investors did not uphold their legal obligations or observe customary practices. Consequently, private sector workers, especially those employed in recently privatised former public enterprises, were also engaged. By 2007 blue-collar and clerical workers in every sector of the economy joined the movement. Ultimately doctors, pharmacists, teachers, and other professionals also participated.

Ad hoc elected strike committees or leaders embedded in informal local networks typically led these actions. Despite well-organised, successful strikes in 2006 and 2007 that achieved substantial economic gains, the strike committee at the mammoth public sector Misr Spinning and Weaving Co. could not establish a regional coordinating body for Nile Delta textile workers or a union independent of ETUF. The previously unheralded municipal real estate tax assessors, after a ten-day sit-in strike in front of the Ministry of Finance in December 2007, achieved the greatest economic gains of the entire movement. The national strike committee followed up in 2008 by establishing the Real Estate Tax Authority Union (RETAU) – the first independent Egyptian trade union in more than half a century.

The quickening pace of workers' collective actions from 2004 to the end of the decade and beyond suggests that the more aggressive implementation of a new modality of capital accumulation in Egypt was a prominent factor in the protest movement of Egyptian workers and ultimately the demand for 'social justice' raised by the January 25 uprising.

The Case of Tunisia

After instituting IMF-inspired austerity measures in the late 1970s, Tunisia adopted an Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program in 1986. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s the UGTT opposed austerity and demanded wage increases commensurate with the rising cost of living. As a consequence, its leadership was crushed after the January 1978 general strike and again following the 1983-84 IMF food riots (although the union did not officially participate in them). Two years after pushing Bourguiba aside in 1987 Ben Ali imposed a collaborationist leadership on the UGTT. But in 2002 he allowed nominally more legitimate leaders to take the helm, in part so that the UGTT could be an effective collaborator against the Islamist Ennahda party. The UGTT continued to make wage demands and defend collective-bargaining rights in the workplace, which ETUF never did. But it ceased to fundamentally oppose structural adjustment and supported Ben Ali in successive fraudulent elections.

UGTT Secretary General Abdesslem Jrad (2002-2011) was an outright collaborator with Ben Ali. But the regime never fully suppressed dissident voices and collective actions unsanctioned by the national executive bureau. A generation of leftists of all stripes joined the UGTT in the 1990s. They were well represented in the leaderships of unions of schoolteachers, health, postal and telecommunications workers, and in smaller numbers in air transport, railways, and among engineers in the phosphate mines. Local, regional and national sectoral unions, and even many congresses, preserved an internal life that the regime could not totally control, a space where the political left could survive and a forum for democratic debate.

There were 4,352 strikes in Tunisia from 1996 to 2007, far more than in Egypt during that same period.¹⁰ But unlike Egypt, most lasted only a day or two. The UGTT executive bureau typically authorised brief strikes to release pressure from, rather than to mobilise, the membership. But there were also wildcat strikes animated by militant local and sectoral leaderships.

By far the largest social contestation in Tunisia in the 2000s erupted at the Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa (CPG), a French colonial concession nationalised in 1966. Until the mid-1970s the company and related enterprises provided full employment for most males of the eastern part of the Gafsa governorate – a long-neglected region of the centre-west. Two projects to ‘reform’ the operations of the CPG sponsored by the World Bank and the African Development Bank Group in the 1970s and 1980s radically reduced employment at the CPG from 15,000 in 1980 to 5,800 in 2006.

In January 2008 the CPG held a recruitment examination for 380 new positions. Immediately after the results were posted, unemployed graduates and the families of workers killed in work accidents (and who therefore had priority for new jobs) occupied the UGTT office in Redeyef. They accused the CPG management and local UGTT leadership of colluding to falsify the results of the examination and hire their relatives

¹⁰ International Labour Office, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics* (Geneva: 2006, 2008).

and clients. Dissident UGTT members and leaders, especially teachers and healthcare workers, and the UDC led sit-ins, marches and other protests in the towns of the Gafsa phosphate mining basin, lasting for six months.

In part because the regime crushed or co-opted all organised opposition, in part because the Gafsa protesters demanded jobs, not democracy or regime change, the oppositional intelligentsia concentrated on the coast offered only belated and inconsistent support (except for the small and hyper-dogmatic Parti Communiste Ouvrier Tunisien, PCOT). The rebellion won a number of new jobs, but the structures of corruption and collaboration between the local UGTT leadership and the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) remained in place.

The Role of Workers' Movements in the Popular Uprisings

The Case of Egypt

The local and informal character of the networks that enabled the Egyptian workers' movement of the 2000s simultaneously limited its ability to act as a national force because those relationships could not be replicated beyond their local social context. Most workers were suspicious of 'politics', which they typically understood as opportunistic meddling of Cairo-based intellectuals seeking to co-opt their struggles for some other purpose. The oppositional intelligentsia tried, but mostly failed, to link up with the workers' movement. In Egypt, unlike Tunisia, schoolteachers and most other white-collar workers and professionals belong to corporatist syndicates rather than unions and did not serve as organic intellectuals of the working class.

The workers' social movement of the 2000s was not a unified 'labor movement' mobilised by labour parties and union federations in the historic Euro-American sense. Egyptian workers contributed substantially to the culture of protest that undermined the Mubarak regime's legitimacy. But, as in Tunisia, they did not establish an enduring alliance with the oppositional intelligentsia who engaged in pro-democracy mobilisations in the 2000s. Therefore, Egyptian workers arrived at 25 January 2011, the first day of the demonstrations that toppled Mubarak, with only a single national demand – a minimum monthly basic wage of 1,200 Egyptian pounds. At the moment of Mubarak's demise, workers could not provide political leadership for the nation or even substantially influence the national political agenda. Indeed many self-proclaimed 'revolutionaries' considered workers' economic demands to be narrow 'special interests'.

The Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU), formed on 30 January 2011 during the occupation of Tahrir Square, sought to link the workers' demands to 'the revolution'. But the EFITU split during the summer of 2011. Neither of its component elements commanded a sufficient base of support, political experience, or logistical resources to compel the post-Mubarak regime to adopt pro-worker legislation of any sort or to reorient the economy away from Washington Consensus policies.

The peak of workers' influence on the post-Mubarak political process was independent trade unionists' temporary imposition of Ahmad Hasan al-Bura'i, long a proponent of trade union pluralism, as interim Minister of Manpower and Migration (i.e. labour) from March 2011 to November 2012. However, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), the real ruler of the country after Mubarak's ouster, the Islamist majority of the parliament that sat briefly in 2012 before being ruled unconstitutionally elected by the pro-Mubarak Supreme Constitutional Court, and President Muhammad Morsi, a Muslim Brother elected in June 2012, all refused to enact legislation prepared by al-Bura'i's ministry that would have guaranteed workers' rights to freedom of association, unionisation and collective bargaining.

The Case of Tunisia

In Tunisia, the Sidi Bouzid secondary teachers' union formed a 'Committee of the Marginalised' that organised the first demonstrations in solidarity with Mohammed Bouazizi, whose self-immolation on 17 December 2010 ignited the Arab uprisings. As the protest movement escalated, UGTT local leaderships in several centre-west provinces organised or facilitated solidarity demonstrations or protested police violence against unarmed protesters. The UGTT national leadership temporised and sought to mediate between the protestors and the regime. But UGTT members finally compelled a reluctant national leadership to call general strikes in several cities, which hastened Ben Ali's departure on 14 January 2011.

UGTT members joined and then, under popular pressure, withdrew from the first post-Ben Ali interim government. They participated prominently in demonstrations that forced the resignation of interim prime minister Mohammed Ghannouchi, who had served in that same post for fourteen years under Ben Ali, and later the dissolution of the former ruling party, the RCD.

Ennahda won a plurality in the September 2011 National Constituent Assembly elections and therefore the right to lead the interim government. Its apparent conciliation with jihadists who assassinated two popular secular leaders in February and July 2013 and its refusal to compromise on a constitution guaranteeing a civil state and women's rights led to a political stalemate. The UGTT was by far the preponderant force in the Quartet of non-governmental organisations including the Employers Association (UTICA), the Bar Association, and the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), which forced the resignation of the interim government, ensured that Tunisia's constitution would be the most liberal in the Arab world, and established a roadmap for formally democratic parliamentary and presidential elections resulting in a rotation of power that allowed the secularist Nida' Tounes to form a new government. Nida' Tounes is a big tent secularist party including both former communists and many elements of the old regime. Its economic policy is perhaps less corrupt, but otherwise undistinguishable from Ben Ali's. Nonetheless, the requirements of procedural democracy have been met.

Conclusion

Their forms of mobilisation, anti-political outlook and limited institutional resources explain why Egyptian workers, despite having participated in an unprecedented mobilisation around economic issues in the decade before Mubarak's demise, ultimately played no political role in determining the political contours of the post-Mubarak era.

In contrast to the political weakness of their Egyptian counterparts, Tunisian workers and the UGTT were decisive in shaping the political trajectory of the post-Ben Ali era. The UGTT could play this role because it had a long history of political engagement and is the largest civil organisation in Tunisia (517,000 members in 2011). It is the only organisation, besides Ennahda and the former ruling party, with a national apparatus. Its white collar members, especially primary and secondary school teachers, many with leftist political affiliations or affinities, had long functioned as the organic intellectuals of dissident and more militant elements in the Ben Ali era.

Tunisian workers and unemployed graduates had an insurgent spirit, local networks which they mobilised for contestation, a history of political engagement and a trade union organisation with a long political history that they could compel, against the wishes of its pro-Ben Ali national leadership, to join them and the rest of the Tunisian people in a struggle against autocracy. Egyptian workers had an insurgent spirit and local networks. But they had no national organisation and were suspicious of explicit engagement in politics. Thus, the kinds of organisations working people could build, their degree of autonomy from the state, and workers' willingness to engage in national politics appear to have been among the salient factors resulting in the installation of a democratic regime in Tunisia – with many unresolved problems, to be sure – and the establishment of a praetorian military autocracy in Egypt that is even more vicious than the Mubarak regime.

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