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The Arab Uprisings of 2011 in Historical Perspective

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[–] Abstract and Keywords

This chapter aims to place the Arab uprisings of 2011 in historical perspective, addressing questions of change and continuity by comparing and contrasting these uprisings with previous cases of contentious mobilization in the region, going back to the nineteenth century. The chapter argues that the uprisings can be linked to growing protests against domestic regimes in the region since the 1970s, and are similar to people-power uprisings in other parts of the world. The chapter points to the under-researched democratic genealogies of these uprisings, arguing that these played an important role in securing the unity of contentious crowds. The mass uprisings had their surprising and creative dimensions; they emerged without any preceding state breakdown and they constituted the people as a sovereign subject in a way distinctive from anticolonial nationalism.

Keywords: uprisings, social movements, contentious mobilization, political hegemony, people power, participatory democracy

This chapter aims to put the Arab uprisings of 2011 into historical perspective. It takes the road less traveled by focusing not on the actions and reactions of powerful and established collective actors, such as the military, or on systems, such as crony capitalism or the new media, but on the mass uprisings themselves. These uprisings are forms of contentious mobilization that involved the new and forceful political intervention of diverse masses of previously unpoliticized subaltern actors. The chapter has two tasks. The first is to develop arguments about what sorts of contexts, antecedents, and comparisons, both within and beyond the region, can help to identify and explain the uprisings. A danger here is determinism and the apparent wisdom of hindsight. The second, related task is to identify what was new, distinctive, and creative in these uprisings, and to find ways to understand such active forms of agency, without explaining them away in terms of something other than themselves.

This chapter argues that these uprisings, distinctively directed against domestic regimes that had previously incarnated anticolonial nationalism, can be compared to uprisings against domestic regimes in the region before 1914, and can be contextualized fruitfully in terms of rising protest against domestic regimes since the 1970s. It is proposed that the important context for these uprisings is the thinning of the political hegemony of domestic regimes in the region since that time. The chapter highlights the uprisings' democratic genealogies, which played a role in making crowd unity possible. These uprisings are compared to people-power uprisings in other parts of the world and new forms of radically democratic activism.

As for the second task, it is argued that the mass uprisings—historical comparisons and explanatory contexts notwithstanding—were surprising and creative. Like the Iranian revolution of 1978–9, their emergence was surprising because it was not preceded by state breakdown, military defeat, or fiscal crisis, and their course was unpredictable because they were capable in some instances of ousting dictators. It is argued that the constitution of the people as an active, rights-bearing, and sovereign subject, distinct in important ways from the people of anticolonial nationalism, was one of the most important innovations at work in 2011; this was a creative act that was fortified by new networked modes of organizing, and new strategies and tactics such as occupation of public squares and pitched battles with police. In

closing the chapter considers some of the weaknesses of people-power uprisings, suggesting that unity in the face of segmentation is one of the most fundamental conditions of success for this form of contentious mobilization.

Popular Uprisings that Brought Down Presidents for Life

The Arab uprisings of 2011 were new in that for the first time since independence the domestic regime of an Arab state or at least the real head of the regime was brought down by a mass popular uprising. When the Tunisian army refused to open fire on masses of civilian protestors, Bin Ali, the strongman president there since 1987, boarded a plane to Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011 and did not return. Mass uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria followed the fall of Bin Ali, along with protests in many other parts of the region. In little more than a year, three more dictators of long tenure fell or were dislodged from power, albeit in increasingly complicated and indirect ways. Most dramatic was the ousting on February 11, 2011 of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, president of the Arab world's most populous state since 1981. He was a leader that many doubted would be "let go" by the United States because of the latter's interest in maintaining the Camp David Accords of 1979 securing an Egyptian-Israeli peace. This assumption was disproved after only eighteen days of protest. On October 20, 2011 Colonel Gaddafi of Libya, president since 1969, was killed after losing control of the country. On February 27, 2012 'Ali 'Abdullah Salih of Yemen, president since 1990, finally ceded power by negotiation.

It was the toppling of these dictators, in large measure as a result of popular protest, that was so extraordinary and unexpected for virtually everybody, from activists to academics. Retrospective claims to prescience rang hollow. Even the Egyptian economist and public intellectual Galal Amin, who came as close to predicting the uprisings as any public figure, nonetheless in his first substantial publication after Mubarak's fall only emphasized the surprise that Egypt had experienced.¹

Historians with the benefit of hindsight are supposed to demonstrate the many ways in which these uprisings were entirely explicable in terms of contexts and antecedents. On the other hand, the historians' task is also to return to the moment and recapture, in historicizing mode, the surprise that such events evoked at the time. In this latter sense, a historical perspective suggests that surprise was a perfectly reasonable response. Even regime change, let alone one originating in popular protest, was something of an innovation in the recent history of the region. All but one of the ruling regimes in the independent states of the Arab world had endured, with personnel changes only, since Colonel Gaddafi's Free Officers' revolutionary coup seized power from King Idris in Libya under the banner of pan-Arab national liberation in 1969. External powers had generally been content to work with, support, and succor the antidemocratic "devil they knew."² The only partial exception was Iraq. Saddam Hussein's strongman rule there since the 1970s, having been supported by the United States in the 1980s, was broken by the US invasion of 2003. This was an exception that seemed to prove a simple rule: the people could *not* bring down the regime. The mass uprising of 1991 in Iraq, we note, was smothered in blood.³ Probably the most significant popular uprising of recent times in the region, the Palestinian intifada of 1987–1991, did not topple a domestic regime. It was directed not at a domestic dictatorship but a colonizing occupation, and was eventually repressed and demobilized, although it did make a mighty contribution to what became the Oslo process in the 1990s. Even fifteen years of Lebanese civil war (1975–1990)—which after the defeat of the Leftist Palestinian forces in 1976 following the Syrian military intervention—was a many-sided conflict that did not sweep away the consociational and sect-based political system.⁴ The "independence intifada" in Lebanon in 2005 was a formidable display of people power, involved the sustained occupation of a central urban square, and led to the withdrawal of the Syrian army which had lain a controlling hand on the country since 1976.⁵ It did not, however, lead to the fall or major reform of the domestic regime, which was reconstituted on relatively familiar lines. The Bahrainis did not bring down the sectarian monarchy there through the long uprising of the 1990s, although certain political concessions were won in the early 2000s.⁶

Bread riots and crowd actions in the 1970s and 1980s were able to slow the pace of International Monetary Fund-led structural adjustment. They did not bring down regimes and, in the main, did not seek to. The resurgence of strike action among industrial workers and civil servants in Egypt after 2004 only blunted privatization.⁷ Further, it is important to note that the vast energies of Islamist movements, many of which did target the "Near Enemy" for revolution, failed to topple a single regime in the Arab world.⁸ The assassination of Egyptian President Anwar Sadat by Islamists in 1981 did not spark the anticipated popular uprising or dislodge the rule of the military. The electoral route pursued by the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) in Algeria after the constitutional opening of 1989, in turn a result of the popular protest of October 1988, led to the cancellation of elections in 1992 and a bloody civil war. None of this, however, dislodged or even fundamentally reformed *le pouvoir* in Algeria.⁹

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Many among the urban and slum-based poor were hunkered down before 2011, thinking less of revolution or even reform, and more about migration opportunities abroad and survivalism at home. This meant “weapons of the weak”: the use of informal networks, the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary,” the maintenance of a certain presence in the streets and slums, and everyday modes of resistance in order to acquire goods and services and make claims on the propertied and powerful.¹⁰ Although street politics, from Tehran to Cairo, involved discontinuous confrontation with police and government officials, it nonetheless avoided overt, organized collective action, the elaboration of a political program, or oppositional ideology, or costly outright assault on the regime. In this regard, the masses were an object of great perplexity to those such as the Egyptian novelist Alaa al-Aswany who wondered in 2010 why they did not rise up in the face of many forms of oppression.¹¹ His book on this issue was republished in the aftermath of the uprisings, now framed as an explanation for the revolution.¹² No such comparable event had unfolded in Israel or Turkey before 2011. The Green movement in Iran in 2009 was an important uprising around a seemingly stolen election, but it mobilized fewer participants than the Arab uprisings, and it did not bring down the president, the supreme leader, or the regime.¹³

The only partially comparable event in the Middle East and North Africa in recent times took place in Iran in 1978–79. Here was a mass, popular, nonviolent uprising directed victoriously against a domestic regime that had not suffered a prior state breakdown, recent defeat in war, major fiscal crisis, blow to its repressive capacities, or peasant rebellion.¹⁴ Both the Arab uprisings and the Iranian revolution shared this “unthinkable” feature, and were hence surprising in this basic way.¹⁵ The spectacle of urban avenues and squares filled with millions of protestors, accompanied by institutional disruption occasioned by strike action and civil disobedience on a major scale, was in some respects regionally pioneered in Iran in late 1978.¹⁶

Apart from these important similarities, however, the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 exhibited many vital differences to the Arab uprisings of 2011. In point of context, it was partly unfinished business from the neocolonial moment of 1953 when the United States engineered a coup to re-establish the Pahlavi Shah on an authoritarian basis against the democratic constitutional system, after the elected prime minister, Muhammad Mossadeq sought economic independence through the nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.¹⁷ In point of activism, the revolution of 1978–79 involved a determined revolutionary leadership with a long track record going back to the 1960s. It had a strong organizational core among Khomeini’s seminary networks and leaders. It expressed a clear ideological program with regard to the reorganization of the state along Shi’a republican lines, a program that had been under development since the late 1950s in Shi’a clerical circles in Najaf, Karbala, and Qom.¹⁸ In Iran, a version of politicized Shi’ism, complete with socioeconomic dimensions and identified with the figure of Ayatollah Khomeini, hegemonized much of the protest. In Iran, guerrilla groups were present to deliver the coup de grâce to the shah’s imperial guard. And after the fall of the shah, revolutionary transformation was driven forward by the revolutionary leadership: the Pahlavi monarchy was replaced with an Islamic republic in ways that involved rapid and far-reaching social, economic, cultural, and political change.

With regard to the Arab uprisings, by contrast, the domestic regimes targeted were not installed by the United States, but were, with the exception of Bahrain, the heirs (Salih, al-Asad, Bin Ali, Mubarak) and even direct protagonists (Gaddafi) of the anticolonial, nationalist, and revolutionary traditions of the 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, the various strands of Sunni-modernist and Salafi-Wahhabi activism mostly got organized after the uprisings had broken out: they did not lead the action or hegemonize its constituencies, whose slogans were universal and secular during the uprisings themselves. They invoked bread, dignity, and freedom, and above all performed and embodied the unity of a rights-bearing and sovereign people.¹⁹ Many activists were relatively newly minted. There was no strong organizational core: activism was more decentralized. Only in Egypt did strike action approach the scale of what took place in Iran.²⁰ There was no clear ideological program for transformation: doctrinalism was viewed as problematic in many activist sectors. The Arab uprisings did not push through sweeping revolutionary change (with the partial exception of Tunisia), and their initial leaderships, insofar as they existed, nowhere took power (with the partial exception of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt). Neither Tunisia nor Egypt attempted to export the revolution, and neither country was invaded by a foreign power, both important features of the revolutions of 1789 (in France), 1917 (in Russia), and 1978–79 (in Iran). These differences from the Iranian case caution against straightforward analogies.

The uprisings are also distinctive in a longer, post-1914 regional perspective. Most of the major uprisings during the period from the First World War to the 1960s were undertaken against colonial rule or against local rulers who were perceived as and often were colonial proxies. Armed struggles of national liberation, such as in Algeria (1954–1962), South Yemen (1963–1967), Oman (1965–1975), and among the Palestinians (1964–1982), along with revolutionary coups d’état (Egypt 1952, Iraq 1958, North Yemen 1962, Libya 1969), not to mention the rounds of armed struggle from Morocco to Iraq that followed the First World War, are hard to compare directly with 2011.²¹ They were armed,

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nationalist, opposed to colonialism, and were marked by liberalism in the 1920s and socialism in the 1950s and 1960s, and were often thick in organization and leadership.

Alternatively, the Cairo fire of January 1952 is suggestive because it involved a major, largely spontaneous rising without any clear leadership or program that quickly subsided and paved the way for the military intervention of July 1952.²² But it targeted with fire the symbols of the colonial order and its domestic allies in a highly charged nationalist context and was not a statewide uprising, but limited to downtown Cairo. The intervention of the Free Officers in 1952, furthermore, was insurrectionary and unpredictable, entirely different to the recent more widely predicted political role of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces or of General el-Sisi.²³ Egypt's insurrection of 1919 was thoroughly mass-based, unarmed, and engaged the liberal middle classes. But it involved the peasantry on a broader scale than the rising of 2011 and was directed above all against colonial rule, not a domestic ruler. One of the striking features of the Arab uprisings is that they did far less than almost any mass uprising since 1914 to define their local rulers as lackeys of the West. The Arab uprisings were very much focused on the tyranny, kleptocracy, corruption, and incompetence of the local regimes. This was, indeed, in contrast with Iran 1978–79, where neocolonialist theses were recast in Islamist clothes: the US was depicted as the Great Satan and Khomeini declared that the rulers of the world, which included the Pahlavi Shah, were America's serfs.

The importance of the attitude the region's militaries took up to political incumbents has been made increasingly clear.²⁴ Some defected, some stayed neutral, others maintained their loyalty to incumbents. It was, nonetheless, the mass uprising that provided the dynamic context which set other actors, powerful and not so powerful, into motion. Military intervention in politics in Egypt (since 1952) and in Turkey (since at least 1913), is no surprise in historical context. The back seat taken by the military in Tunisia, conversely, was to be expected given the military's highly limited role in political society there. By the same token, Syria's military could be expected to continue to follow orders, since this was a continuation of the pattern established in the massive suppression of the Hama rising of 1982, and nothing new. The major surprise, on the other hand, and what no one had predicted except in vague terms, was the mass uprising. If it became in the interests of the military in Tunisia and Egypt to detach their fates from those of the political incumbents,²⁵ the decisive factor that made this new calculus of interest possible was the uprising.

Nineteenth-century Comparisons

Comparisons with protests and uprisings in the nineteenth century should not be dismissed. Before 1914, the constitutional movements in Khedivial Egypt (1881–82), Qajar Iran (1905–11), and the Ottoman Empire (1908) wrought major political concessions from domestic governments, and sometimes drew in foreign invasion or intervention. They were led in large measure by urban liberals and sometimes patriots, and targeted the rulers of local states. But patriotism meant something different (and new) in states that were actually empires or parts of empires, and these movements were less evidently mass popular uprisings. In Egypt, the 'Urabi movement, albeit making popular appeals, was led by officers, provincial notables, and merchants maneuvering for power within the state, not by peasants, artisans, or townspeople. The latter, when they did rise after the first British invasion in June 1882, did so for different reasons, under different banners, and not in ways that were coordinated with the 'Urabiyyin.²⁶ In Qajar Iran during 1905–11, peasants and urban townspeople were outside and quickly became disaffected with the core alliance of liberals, bazaar, and clergy, champions of the new parliament.²⁷ In Istanbul in 1908, the constitutional movement was led by an alliance of elitist, antireligious liberals and military²⁸; the most popular uprising of the period was in fact in the name of Islam in 1909 *against* the Young Turks and their military methods.

Risings involving commoners (*al-'amma*, *al-ra'iya*) and defecting elites (*al-khassa*, *al-'askeri*), and notables (*a'yan*) in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against Ottoman, Ottoman–Egyptian, Moroccan, and local rule on occasion unseated sultans or local potentates, and in some cases had a mass character. In 1703, an uprising against the new lifetime tax farms deposed the Ottoman Sultan Mustafa II (r. 1695–1703) and put Ahmed III (r. 1703–1730) on the throne. The uprising of Patrona Halil in 1730 deposed Ahmed III and replaced him with Mahmut I (1730–1754).²⁹ In Izmir in 1788, urban artisans, guilds, and townspeople rose against the tripling of taxes stemming from the outbreak of war in 1787, ousting a number of important officials and local notables.³⁰ Ottoman Sultan Selim III (r. 1789–1807) was unseated in May 1807 and replaced as a result of mass protests of Janissaries, 'ulama, and townspeople against his new conscript army.³¹ There were commoner uprisings in Moroccan towns against merchants and heavy taxes on several occasions (e.g. 1818 and 1873 in Fez, and in 1844 in Rabat).³² In Morocco, notables and commoners were involved in the risings of 'Abd al-Hafiz (1875–1937), which brought this pretender to the sultanate in 1908, and of Ahmad al-Hiba (1876–1919),

whose revolutionary heterodoxies briefly held sway in Marrakesh after the sultan had signed Morocco over to the French Protectorate in 1912.³³ Commoner uprisings, by turns against taxation and feudalism, were something of a tradition on Mount Lebanon: there were risings, for example, in 1790, 1821, 1840, and most famously in 1858–1860, when the Christian muleteer Tanyus Shahin evicted the Khazin notables in an initially nonviolent way in the name of a radically egalitarian interpretation of the *tanzimat* (1839–1876).³⁴ Commoner risings proclaiming loyalty to the sultan but seeking redress in matters of taxation and local exploitation, and laying claim to the promises of the *tanzimat* were relatively common in the Balkans during the nineteenth century.³⁵ Finally, millenarian uprisings, sometimes with a mass base, against taxes, economic exploitation, urban orthodoxy, and corrupt Muslim rulers studded the history of the Nile Valley during the nineteenth century.³⁶ The Mahdiyya of 1881–1885, which created a state on the Upper Nile almost the size of Egypt, was only the most successful of these uprisings against Ottoman–Egyptian rule and Islamic orthodoxy.³⁷

Pre-1914 uprisings and their lessons regarding reform, authoritarianism, sectarian violence, and imperial intervention are instructive for the present. Strongmen have come to power after popular protest before. In Egypt in 1805, commoner protest played an important role in forcing out the existing governor and championing the accession to power of the warlord and dynasty-builder Muhammad Ali Pasha (r. 1805–1849), who certainly brought law and order, but also massacred opponents, coerced a conscript army into existence, and massively increased the tax burden.³⁸ Here was a faint echo of the Egyptian events of June–July 2013, when a partly pro-army popular uprising (June 30, 2013) paved the way for a military coup (July 3, 2013), whose leaderships went on to re-establish the security state through massacre and repression. Tanyus Shahin's (1815–1895) egalitarian uprising in the historic Bilad al-Sham (present-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Israel/Palestine) wound up in sectarianism and violence because it was unable to prevent a confrontation between Christian and Druze in the mixed districts of Mount Lebanon and the Shuf.³⁹ Activists in Syria since 2011 have certainly faced the acute problems posed by the politics of sectarianism and the drift towards violence in 2011–12. Present-day external powers have seized on the opportunities presented by uprisings to intervene militarily just as they did in the nineteenth century. On the other hand, the commoner rising of 1889 in Jabal Druze in Bilad al-Sham won real and lasting economic and political concessions.⁴⁰

These examples, albeit drawn from a very different historical context to the present, suggest more generally that mass uprisings against domestic (rather than colonial) tyranny, variously under the banners of religion, justice, rights, custom, and local autonomy, are not alien to the modern history of the region, as more contemporary-focused views have suggested. Historically, nationalism has not been the only basis for regional mass mobilization. This historical perspective cautions against the exceptionalist view in which the Arab uprisings are seen as something fundamentally new, contrary in some sense to the constituted nature of the region, whatever that would be, and therefore owing something decisive to external influence, conspiracy, extraordinary innovation, or revolutionary awakening. The capacities of the peoples of the region to mount forceful and even revolutionary challenges to established authorities has a long history and should not be treated as a fundamental rupture with the past, however surprising the events of 2011. The perspective underlines, finally, the existence of long-term shifts in the targets of protest that seem to respond to historical and sociopolitical contexts. These targets included domestic rulers before 1914, colonialism and neocolonialism from the First World War until the 1960s and 1970s, and a return to an emphasis on domestic regimes since the 1970s (global jihad and resistance against Israeli colonization and warmongering aside).

Protests Targeting Regimes Since the 1970s

The military firmly established itself in Arab state politics after independence. Democratic participation, independent organizing, and civil liberties were curtailed or excluded on the basis that rule by patriotic Free Officers or strongmen of civilian origin would bring economic growth, redistribution, social mobility, and social reform. This archetypal, antidemocratic “social pact” was established in Egypt in 1952 and played an important role in various ways in Tunisia after 1955, Iraq after 1958, Syria after 1963, Algeria after 1965, Yemen after 1967, and Libya after 1969. It was burnished as a form of cultural hegemony by recourse to pan-Arabism and strong forms of nationalism and sometimes Third Worldism on the regional and international stage.

Absolutism in independent Saudi Arabia was established and maintained through the Leftist and pan-Arab challenges of the 1950s and 1960s in part because of elite arrangements within the dominant bloc, but also with regard to the subaltern population, rentier provisionism, segmentation via the import and sharp exclusion of working and productive classes, and by the cultivation of an absolutist version of Salafi-Wahhabism that preached a sectarian antipolitics that left political decisions to the *waliyy al-amr* (the ruler) to whom obedience was required. In most of the other Gulf states,

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post-independence consent in an authoritarian context was won by rentierism, migration segmentation and exclusion, and the cultivation of the image of rulers who cherished and promoted Arab values.⁴¹

It is preponderantly in the formerly “revolutionary republics” that the post-independence form of hegemony has seriously unraveled, and therefore the basis for post-independence antidemocratic rule has been fundamentally eroded. Their social pacts were increasingly violated from the 1970s onwards, when indicators on real economic growth, redistribution, social mobility, and social reform ceased to improve or went into reverse. While crony capitalism meant spoils for a narrow dominant bloc, hegemony on a wider scale was never reformulated on new bases, as promises over new forms of prosperity and democracy always rang hollow for the mass of the subaltern population. Credentials in pan-Arabism and nationalism were not replaced with alternative forms of cultural hegemony. Among the nonrevolutionary republics, Bahrain’s rentier provisionism has become less significant over time with the reduction in oil production. It is partially explicable, therefore, that as these forms of consent were thinned out, and as the promised provisions of dictatorship became increasingly threadbare from the late 1960s onwards, that protests against domestic, post-independence regimes became increasingly frequent.

Uprisings Since 1977

In the 1970s, the tradition of popular uprising, when diverse masses of ordinary people poured onto the streets in ways that were not immediately under the control of any one leadership, frequently in anti-imperial clothes during the colonial period, was taken up anew in the region, this time targeting the domestic regime. The intifada of January 18–19, 1977, in Egypt, was a popular uprising, the most dramatic mass action since the Cairo fire of January 1952. In accordance with IMF structural adjustment prescriptions, Sadat’s government announced on January 17 a 50% cut in subsidies for basic consumer goods, implying steep rises in the price of bread, sugar, tea, and bottled gas, and important rises in the price of rice, cooking oil, macaroni, gasoline, and cigarettes. In the capital, protestors, led initially by industrial workers, increasingly filled the streets and violent confrontations with security forces developed. Downtown Cairo was largely in the hands of the demonstrators for two days. Considerable damage was done to regime institutions and commercial private property owned by Sadat’s nouveau-riche. There were significant protests in Alexandria and elsewhere. To judge by their slogans, the demonstrators saw themselves as the people, as workers, students, and peasants, suffering from poverty and hunger, pitted against corrupt and tyrannical authorities, corrupt, wealthy, exploitative, and even decadent elites, and the dangers of capitalism.⁴²

Broadly comparable, pioneering waves of protest against post-independence regimes and their new forms of crony capitalism took place elsewhere in the region. There was a wave of strikes in Tunisia in 1977 in which the country’s major union federation, the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT), played an important role. These culminated in a general strike in 1978. There were major street protests against price hikes for basic commodities in Morocco in 1981 and in both Morocco and Tunisia in 1984, when such protests were able to win socioeconomic concessions in many cases and slow the course of neoliberal advance.⁴³ On October 5, 1988, thousands of youths, mostly male secondary-school students and unemployed, ransacked central Algiers. Over the following two days, the movement spread across the country, drawing in broader constituencies and Islamist organizations, and bringing military repression from the government. While major protests had taken place in the name of the Amazigh/Berbers in 1980, the protests of 1988 were more widespread, drew in a wider cross section of the public. They involved an array of economic and political motivations and demands.⁴⁴ In Bahrain, a broad-based uprising seeking political concessions (above all the reinstatement of the National Assembly) from the Sunni sectarian monarchy continued from 1994 to 1998–99. Widespread protests took place in the wake of the “stolen election” in Iran in 2009.

This history gives the lie to those who professed astonishment that the uprisings of 2011 were not hegemonized by Islamism: none of the above-mentioned mass protests were led or initiated by Islamists or their demands, slogans, and networks. In Algeria in 1988, for example, Islamists joined after the urban poor had started the action. The two-day uprising in Egypt in 1977 does not seem to have had any specifically Islamist content. Indeed, the strategy of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood never included a mass uprising: the stage of “execution,” insofar as it was pursued (largely before 1952), was a poorly defined armed struggle, but not an insurrection of the masses. The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria called for a mass uprising in 1982, but in practice their antiregime jihad involved organized cadres undertaking armed attacks on regime targets and insurrectionary protest in 1982 was limited to Hama.⁴⁵ If we broaden the focus we note that in both the first Palestinian intifada of 1987–91, and the uprising in Lebanon in 2005, the more spontaneous aspects of these protests were not organized by Islamists and did not express Islamist slogans. Only in Iran in 1978–79 did

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Islamists stand at the head of a mass uprising, quite likely because politicized Shi'ism not only had a republican and democratic component, but also because it was far more explicit than many strands of Sunni modernism, let alone Salafi-Wahhabism, on socioeconomic questions and the problems of the dispossessed. Indeed, it was not just a strategic decision, fear of the American "veto" that kept Islamist banners at home during the Egyptian uprising of 2011; it was also that Islamist framing was not capable of uniting the protesters.

Democratic Genealogies

These observations suggest a popular democratic genealogy to the uprisings of 2011 that has been under-researched. Amid the thinning political hegemony of the post-independence regimes, some sought to reconstitute the original social pact, looking back to Nasserism and Baathism. Others believed, in revolutionary or reformist modes, that Islam was the solution, and that the secular state had usurped the true destiny of the region. Less emphasized is that others looked for answers and solutions in democratic forms of socialism or Islamism, or participatory and even radically democratic forms of politics.

Influenced by the rejection of official communism in 1960s France, a significant group of Lebanese intellectuals and activists developed an interest in democratic forms of socialism in the 1960s and early 1970s. They elaborated a Leftist critique of the Arab world's military and "progressive" regimes and were active in a number of organizations, including ones such as Socialist Lebanon (1964–70).⁴⁶ The socialism of the Lebanese National Movement in the mid-1970s was sharply critical of the military regimes, and Maoist currents aside, had democratic, decentralized, and even anarchic features.⁴⁷ In Egypt, important intellectuals such as Anwar Abd al-Malik criticized Egypt's "military society" as early as 1962 for failing to bring about popular democracy.⁴⁸ Democratic demands were at work in Egypt in the slogans of 1977, one of which ran as follows:

The first demand, young men, is the right to a multi-party system / The second demand, you masses, is the right to publication and expression / The third demand, oh free people, is fixed prices (*Awwal matlab ya shabab, haqq ta'addud al-ahzab / Tani matlab ya jamahir, haqq al-nashr wa-l-ta'bir / Talit matlab ya ahrar, rabt al-qjr bi-l-as'ar*).⁴⁹

Sunni modernist Islamism may not have been as precise as politicized Shi'ism on the place of republican politics. However, unlike Salafi-Wahhabism it never decisively rejected party politics, elections, parliaments, and constitutions, whether in theory or in practice. This was demonstrated by the democratic mobilization of the FIS in Algeria between 1989 and 1992, as well as other cases in Egypt, Jordan, and Yemen.⁵⁰ The reform movement in Iran from the early 1990s onwards pushed a more democratic and women's rights-oriented interpretation of Shi'a Islam.⁵¹

Liberal, democratic, and sometime secular themes were taken up in the first Palestinian intifada, the Bahrain uprising in the 1990s, the short-lived Damascus "spring" of 2000–2001, the Boycott, Divestment Sanctions (BDS) movement for Palestinian rights after 2004, the independence intifada in Lebanon in 2005, and in the return of liberal and labor protest in Egypt in the 2000s, including the Kifaya movement, opposing dynastic succession in Egypt in 2005. Such themes were also at work in the labor protests in Gafsa in Tunisia in 2008, among Anarchists against the Wall in Israel/Palestine, and among militant bloggers using social media to denounce human-rights abuses in various parts of the region from at least 2008 onwards.⁵² In particular, a new generation of "liberal youth" emerged on the regional scene after the 2000s. While downplaying the language of socialism, these groups increasingly spoke in the languages of human rights and individual freedom, and sometimes found progressive inspiration in themes of radical and participatory democracy. They targeted the abuse, tyranny, and corruption of the crony capitalist regimes in place, and made much use of new media to communicate and publicize their views. In Tunisia and Egypt, languages of social and economic rights were elaborated anew by a labor movement re-energized to protect itself against privatization, cutbacks, and corruption, and workers in their millions, especially in Egypt, became practiced in strike action and protest. These democratic forms of activism, alongside new assertions of social and economic rights, played an important role in the background to the Arab uprisings and their leading slogans of bread, dignity, and freedom.

Crowd Unity and Participatory Democracy

The unity of the crowds in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond in 2011 was not just a matter of "surging alongside one another" by diverse groups with entirely different interests and concerns: if so, how could the popular unity that the uprisings

exhibited have been constituted? Nor was it simply a matter of a liminal and fleeting experience of *communitas*, although this was undoubtedly part of the picture. Nor clearly, was this unity pre-given or constituted on the spot by a vanguard that stepped up to hegemonize the crowd, as the Islamists in Algeria had done to some extent in 1988–89. This was so for the simple reason that no such vanguard or leadership existed in 2011, whether among workers, Islamists, or revolutionary youth. These different groups and their organizations, in Egypt at least, took their place alongside urban poor, women, Copts, public-sector workers, and others within a broader, informal revolutionary coalition capable of expressing coherent demands and demonstrating considerable powers of solidarity. New media and the Internet cannot explain this unity; a historical perspective shows that major protests always make use of the communication technologies at hand. This has been so throughout the history of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), from rumor in nineteenth-century Algeria, to radio in the 1950s and 1960s, to cassette-tapes in the 1970s.⁵³ Protestors *and* their opponents make use of these technologies, and technology can be used in ways that are divisive. In other words, if we are to eschew technological determinism, we need to understand how popular unity was achieved among millions of protestors, a rare achievement by historical standards, even if briefly, in certain parts of the Arab world in 2011.

The democratic genealogy sketched here may serve to explain in part how this unity was possible. Various segments of the liberal youth had made attempts to eschew doctrine, hierarchy, and ideological division in the years preceding the uprisings. They had also made use of networked, leaderless, and “leaderful” forms of organizing, forms of coordination that are open to new adherents, and which do not police their own boundaries with expulsions, membership cards and dues, or doctrinal tests. Liberal youth had rejected the idea of the sole leader, a form which would almost certainly have acted to divide rather than unite the mass of the population in the context of 2011.⁵⁴

This participatory democratic style had considerable potential as a basis of unity, at least if we consider Egypt as a case study. It formed an important basis for the links and alliances that were forged between liberals and Muslim Brotherhood youth, insofar as such links relied absolutely on the readiness of protagonists to set aside organizational and doctrinal differences. Less noted is the significance of the fact that the labor movement, informally and locally organized, was highly suspicious of urban leaderships, formal organizations, and ideologues. It was far more likely that under these circumstances, the labor movement would join forces with groups that did *not* proclaim that they knew in advance what were the true economic and political interests of workers. The respectable, apolitical, and patriotic middle classes in Egypt, furthermore, were far more likely to be inspired by Wael Ghonim’s lowest-common-denominator style of framing, his eschewal of “politics” and “ideology,” and his positioning as a “good son of Egypt,” than by more openly “political” currents.⁵⁵ Likewise, the urban poor, scraping together livelihoods, sometimes in confrontation with elements of the “shattered state,” and developing their own informal networks and rules and codes of action, had undermined the ideological hegemony of the state.⁵⁶ They were hardly likely to be drawn to wealthy secular activists proclaiming a new program, leadership, and organization that would transform state and society in some systemic way. Quite apart from the class issues at stake, the poor knew above all else that there was no such formal and functioning system to be transformed; formal rules and actual practice were so far apart as to make society seem as if it was “structured as a joke.”⁵⁷ When the liberals targeted the human-rights abuses of the ubiquitous and intrusive police, however, this was, indeed, a language that the poor could understand. While uprisings are often networked, decentralized, and partially leaderless, some sectors of the liberal youth in the Arab uprisings made a virtue of this horizontalist organizational structure, an important participatory democratic background that made possible alliances between diverse and usually mutually divided groups. For this reason, horizontalism was more important than its relatively thin sociology might suggest.

The People Demand!

The historical perspective, nonetheless, has an almost built-in tendency towards determinism. A complete historical explanation often leaves no room for creativity—understood in terms of the arrival of a new collective actor, or the rapid rise to potency of a previously fragile and inchoate collective actor—as everything is explained in terms of antecedents or accidents. Historians may be able to identify the change in “continuity and change,” but they often end up explaining it away, either by recourse to contingency, or by reference to the overweening capacities of an existing powerful actor (individual or collective), or with reference to a grand overarching process—modernization, capitalist development, or globalization. One of the most important forms of creativity to emerge from the Arab uprisings, however, was the on-the-spot and unpre-determined constitution of *the people* as a rights-bearing, activist, diverse, demanding, and sovereign subject. This constitution was perhaps best encapsulated when the well-worn poetry of the Tunisian national anthem was infused with new meaning:

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If, one day, a people desires to live / Then fate will answer their call / Darkness must dissipate / And must the chain give way.⁵⁸

The idea of popular sovereignty had been established in the region in the age of anticolonial nationalism, but the idea that a rights-bearing people in a post-independence context could *en masse* realistically demand and bring about the fall of the local, national regime was something new. Revolutionary calls have indeed been largely monopolized by Islamists or socialists, in different registers, in recent decades. What is so striking is that no particular segment, individual, or organization devised this revolutionary call in advance. The slogan “the people demand to bring down the regime” (*al-sha’b yurid isqat al-nizam*) originated in Tunisia in the heat of the action; its status became so iconic that not even Egyptians translated it into their own colloquial. In this phrase, the people did not only demand, but implied through the transitive verb “*asqata*” that it was they who would undertake the action and actually overthrow the regime themselves. This idea was unthinkable, laughable even, the preserve of cranks and idealists, only weeks before. It is hard, therefore, to resist the notion that this leading idea emerged from the struggle itself, and did not precede it.

To grasp this, it may be helpful to consider how new connections between previously unconnected but subordinated constituencies can give rise to new feelings of empowerment, the collapse of the “wall of fear,” and new forms of collective solidarity capable of authorizing themselves and bringing into being demands and collective agencies that did not previously exist or were fragile or protean. In the Arab uprisings, such new solidarities and demands marched together with the new strategies and tactics that also emerged in the heat of the action. These moves included the continuous occupation of major public squares, so central to the theater of the regime’s repressive power, the swarming tactics that enabled demonstrators to access the squares in the first place (by gathering first in back streets, and drumming up support there), and the pitched battles with police that astonishingly degraded the capacity of the security forces to repress crowds and discharge their more quotidian functions.⁵⁹ These forms of organization, strategies, and tactics performed the unity of the people, and the people’s unity stood on the effectiveness of these repertoires.

People Power

The foregoing suggests that the Arab uprisings can be compared broadly to people-power uprisings, characterized by two keen observers as relatively nonviolent demonstrations in which hundreds of thousands simply showed their disgust, lack of fear, and unwillingness to cooperate with the old regime in massive demonstrations in urban public spaces.⁶⁰

Such nonviolent uprisings do not involve disciplined hierarchical organization and armed struggle; nor do they necessarily propose through any determined revolutionary leadership an alternative ideological blueprint for state and society. Independent or nominally independent nation-states have witnessed such uprisings since the 1980s. One such case was the Philippines in 1986, and there were a number of lesser-known cases in southeast Asia from the 1980s to the 2000s.⁶¹ Eastern Europe during 1989–90 furnished a number of cognate examples. Finally, there were “color revolutions” in former Soviet republics in the 2000s. In this perspective, and inspired explicitly and implicitly by the Arab uprisings, Occupy movements in Spain, Greece, London, New York, Iceland, the occupation of the Maidan in Ukraine, and more recently protests in Turkey, Brazil, and Hong Kong, have also exhibited characteristics of people power.

On the global scene, moreover, movements have for some time placed weight on the logics of participatory democracy and horizontalism, have eschewed vertical hierarchies, and embraced decentralization, diversity, and networked structures. Since 1968, these movements have worked in progressive circles to replace and rework official, doctrinal, hierarchical, and statist communism. The alter-globalization and social-justice movement has made much of “[p]refiguration, horizontality, diversity, decentralisation and the network structure.”⁶² Occupy movements embraced consensus-seeking and participatory decision-making processes in opposition to Left doctrinalism and sectarianism.⁶³ The movement of landless workers in Brazil since 1984 eschewed the use of a party and invoked themes of decentralization, non-hierarchy, and consensus; *piquetero* movements of the unemployed in Argentina emphasized themes of autonomy and decentralization.⁶⁴ The term “horizontalism” (*horizontalidad*) was coined in Argentina to describe the movements that emerged there in December 2001 after the economic crisis. This activism was distinctive in its rejection of a political program and its attempts to create directly democratic and deliberative spaces and new social relationships.⁶⁵ The global spread of demonstrations against the Iraq War of 2003 evoked a strong mass rejection of militarism, neoliberalism, and racism as evinced in the US–UK decision to attack Iraq on a unilateral and illegal basis in 2003.⁶⁶ In some respects, these demonstrations, traveling with the rising sun from Australia to California, by way of Egypt and the UK, were the transnational equivalent, albeit at a far lower level of institutional disruption, of people-power uprisings in different

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national settings, this time with the target being the predatory policies of the United States. In this perspective, the Arab uprisings in 2011 are in some ways comparable to uprisings and participatory democratic forms that have been important in various parts of the world in recent times.

Weaknesses of People Power

The Arab uprisings suggest, however, that people power is vulnerable to military repression and even more to the segmentation of the people. "The condition of the success of ... 'people power' revolution" write McAdam and Sewell, "is that the regimes in power be unwilling to use their superior military force in putting the demonstrations down."⁶⁷ In Bahrain and Syria, above all, where military force was used extensively against the crowds, and in Egypt and Tunisia, where in 2011 it was not, seem to confirm the importance of the role of the military in the success or failure of this kind of uprising. In Bahrain and Syria existing regimes endure, while in Egypt and Tunisia transformation was much more far-reaching, even if Egypt has now reconstituted, in an unstable and violent fashion, a security state. People power, unlike guerrilla warfare, does not have a clear strategy for forceful victory in the case of a direct confrontation with tanks and missiles. The region's recent history seems to confirm the same point: Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq did not hesitate to crush uprisings from the 1970s to the 1990s, and these regimes survived, while during the same period in Iran, the shah did hesitate to unleash the full weight of his available repressive capacity against the crowds and his regime fell.

We should note that military decisions to use force are by no means innocent of geopolitical factors. In the face of a people-power uprising, the decision to repress with force may turn in part on external backing. In Eastern Europe in 1989–90, Soviet leader Gorbachev made clear that he would not lend military support to the Warsaw Pact regimes. Likewise, in Lebanon in 2005 the Russians did not give Syria the green light to engage in the violent repression of the independence intifada in Lebanon; the Syrians withdrew. In Egypt in 2011, the White House set itself against a military bloodbath and the army defected. In Bahrain in 2011, the military intervention of Saudi Arabia was decisive in crushing the crowds, while other important external backers, the United States and the United Kingdom, turned a blind eye or continued to support the Bahraini monarchy. By contrast, in Egypt in 2013, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) offered financial and diplomatic support for a military take-over in Egypt and the ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood there. The Brotherhood's occupation of Rab'a and al-Nahda squares then proved unable to protect their protagonists from massacre at the hands of the Egyptian security forces.

On the other hand, when the people can demonstrate what Tilly called WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment),⁶⁸ it was arguably more likely that militaries would vacillate and even withdraw their support from political incumbents. Iran offered a partial case of this, where military vacillation may have been linked to the WUNC of the crowds, especially because the shah did have the backing of the United States. And in Syria and Iraq in the 1980s, uprisings linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, to region, to Shi'a, or to Kurds were always segmented in some way, relative to the people as a whole, and thus failed to demonstrate popular unity. Likewise in Bahrain and Syria, protestors were vulnerable to the charge of sectarianism, and in Syria in particular, certain minorities preferred to stick with the strongman they knew, fearing the Islamist sectarianism that might emerge from any uprising. In Yemen and Libya, popular unity was always harder to demonstrate, and results were, in keeping with this, more ambiguous. The WUNC of "the people" in Egypt and Tunisia, on the other hand, together with the unarmed nature of the action, played a role in persuading militaries in Egypt and Tunisia to recalculate where their interests lay, and to vacillate and even defect. This move was greatly hastened in Egypt by the great popularity which the army demonstrably enjoyed. In Tunisia, France continued to back the regime until a very late stage. Various strands of Islamism, it should be noted, above all those drawn from Salafi-Wahhabism, have acutely exacerbated segmentation. While the military factor is vital, along with the position adopted by external backers, we should not lose sight of the fact that popular unity is equally significant and perhaps even more important to the overall outcome.

Finally, while horizontalist principles were important in enabling the unity of diverse constituencies amid a revolutionary uprising, they were less effective or even at odds with the exigencies of mobilization within political society when opportunities opened up in electoral processes and elsewhere after the crowds had gone home. The eschewal of organization, leadership, and program, in a situation where negotiators, spokespersons, policies, representative mechanisms, and organization were required was counterproductive. Those who did row back on their principles in order to become engaged in this kind of politics could be seen as sellouts. Those who did not "sell out" were ineffective. It was a harsh dilemma. Those adept at revolution could not be expected, necessarily, to be strong in electoral games. The best outcomes in Tunisia were quite likely related to the way that strong organizations meshed with continued crowd actions

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capable of achieving significant institutional disruption. On several decisive occasions, derogation from popular rights were confronted and defeated by this kind of combination.

Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to put the Arab uprisings of 2011 in historical perspective, identifying and explaining continuity and change without erasing creativity. It has been argued that mass uprisings against domestic rules and regimes have been seen before in the region, albeit in a very different historical context, under prenationalist banners during the nineteenth century. More recently, contentious mobilizations, including uprisings of various kinds, targeting domestic regimes and involving participatory and democratic content, have taken place increasingly in the region since the 1970s, responding to the thinning of the political hegemony of the region's rulers and regimes. The relevant global comparison, it has been argued, is with people-power uprisings in various parts of the world in recent times and with various new strands in radically democratic activism, which in the MENA region played an important role in securing the unity of the protesting crowds. The chapter has argued that the mass uprisings had their surprising and creative dimensions: they emerged without any preceding state breakdown, and they constituted the people as a sovereign, rights-bearing, and diverse subject in a way distinctive from anticolonial nationalism. The chapter suggests that while people power faces formidable external foes, above all decision-making located in the military and among its external backers, the main internal weakness that people power has to overcome is segmentation. The perspective offered here suggests that in the present and future, crises and protests will continue as long as political society and its external backers continue to think and act in repressive, identitarian, or merely provisionist terms, and as long as the people of the region's long and tenacious search for more participatory and democratic political arrangements is repressed.

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Notes:

- (1) Kurzman (2012: 380).
- (2) Brownlee (2012).
- (3) Nakash (1994: 274–280).
- (4) Picard (2002).
- (5) Kassir (2005).

- (6) Tripp (2013: 107–108).
- (7) Beinín and Duboc (2013).
- (8) Gerges (2005).
- (9) Roberts (2003).
- (10) Bayat (1997); Singerman (1995); Ismail (2006).
- (11) Al-Aswany (2010).
- (12) Al-Aswany (2011).
- (13) Tripp (2013: 82–88).
- (14) Skocpol (1982).
- (15) Kurzman (2004).
- (16) Kurzman (2004: 122).
- (17) Abrahamian (2001).
- (18) Louër (2008).
- (19) Compare Tripp (2013: 133).
- (20) Compare Bayat (1987) with Alexander and Bassiouny (2014).
- (21) Halliday (1974); Provence (2005); Quandt (1969); Sayigh (1997); Takriti (2013).
- (22) Reynolds (2012).
- (23) Gordon (1997).
- (24) Springborg (2014).
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