RE: The Contentious Roots of the Egyptian Revolution

Sammy Zeyad Badran

Contact Information:
Email: Badran@ku.edu
Phone: (952) 250-2681
Address: 1734 Ohio St. Apt# 23
Lawrence, KS 66044

Biography:

Sammy Badran is a graduate student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Kansas. He recently received his M.A. from the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. His current research interests include contentious politics within authoritarian nation-states, social movement theories, organizational strategies, cyber-activism, mass behavior and Middle Eastern politics. He is especially interested in contentious politics and social movement theories in relation to the Egyptian revolution of 2011. Sammy can be reached at badran@ku.edu

All research for this article was conducted within the Department of Political Science at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.
ABSTRACT

Although real socio-economic injustices may have been the justification for the Egyptian revolution of 2011, it was not the cause of Egypt’s politicization. Demonstrators peacefully toppled a strong western ally on the premise of high unemployment, lack of opportunity, lack of free elections, food inflation, corruption, and lack of democracy, among other factors. Why did social mobilization lead to a social movement against a state that’s highly dependent on coercion? Considering that access to social networks, high unemployment, systematic corruption, and economic stagnation are all commonplace throughout the world; the Egyptian revolution is an anomaly. This paper argues that an analysis of the possible roots of the modern era of contentious politics in Egypt and its subsequent politicization will help demystify and decipher how this anomaly occurred. Focusing on the transnationally inspired dynamics of historically unprecedented protest events in relation to Egypt’s political and social context will shed light upon the central question that this paper aims analyze; how and when did politics make the shift from internal social relations to contentious street politics?

Keywords: Egyptian Revolution, contentious politics, social movements, hegemony, Sidney Tarrow, Charles Tilly
THE CONTENTIOUS ROOTS OF THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

By

Sammy Z. Badran
INTRODUCTION

Beginning on January 25th, 2011, collective action in the form of demonstrations, marches, strikes, riots, torching of police trucks, and occupations of symbolic spaces engulfed an ostensibly stable nation-state. Considering that access to social networks, high unemployment, systematic corruption, and economic stagnation are all commonplace throughout the world; the Egyptian uprising is an anomaly. These are the typical conditions of much of the world. If we are to accept the normative narrative of “evil dictator vs. oppressed people”, then similar uprisings should have engulfed most countries with similar circumstances globally. Specialist in Egyptian affairs, Mona El-Ghobashy, went as far as stating that: “If there was ever to be a popular uprising against autocratic rule, it should not have come in Egypt” (El-Ghobashy 2011). This event begs the question; how did this happen?

There is ample evidence to support the prevailing narrative that traces failed neoliberal economic policies as the prime drivers of revolution, but these globally prevalent symptoms of neoliberalism fail to explain the politicization and subsequent mobilization of the Egyptian people. Answers concerning why this event occurred can be linked to failed neoliberal policies, but an analysis of the possible roots of the modern era of contentious politics (collective political endeavors) within Egypt will help demystify and decipher how this anomaly occurred. An economic analysis is essential to explaining the deep rooted frustrations that underline the fundamental concerns of the average participant of the mass, but fails to delineate the diverse forms of dynamic
contentious politics that has characterized different episodes of protest within modern Egypt under Mubarak.

My analyses will primarily focus on the mechanisms and processes of Egypt’s long history of contentious politics: the episodic and disruptive-techniques utilized by demonstrators against the state’s interests. Focusing on the transnationally inspired dynamics of historically unprecedented protest events in relation to Egypt’s political and social context will shed light upon the central question that this paper aims analyze; *how and when did politics make the shift from internal social relations to contentious street politics?* Sidney Tarrow’s and Charles Tilly’s differentiation between continuous politics limited to internal social relations and episodic contentious politics made collectively is critical to understanding why many Egyptians decided to participate in the revolution of 2011. The internal social relations that take place in political parties or interest groups “involves no collective public struggle whatsoever”, while contentious politics occurs in public and “involves interaction between makers of claims and others” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004: 5). Therefore, Tilly’s and Tarrow’s differentiation of politics sheds light on the logic behind why the pre-history of the Egyptian revolution occurred on the streets and not solely in parliaments, courts, unions, and political parties. Indeed, an obvious message of the Egyptian revolution has been that effective claim-making strategies within such an authoritarian environment must take place collectively, episodically, publically, and contentiously on the streets.
CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

In a shift to the analysis of process, Tarrow and Tilly schematize mechanisms of collective action that lead to episodes of contentious politics. According to Tarrow and Tilly, contentious politics is a combination of contention, politics, and collective action (Tarrow and Tilly 2006: 5). Mechanisms are the certain “events that produce the same immediate effects over a wide range of circumstances” and processes “assemble mechanisms into combinations and sequences that produce larger scale effects” (Tarrow et al. 2006: 214). These various mechanisms and processes allow us to better conceive the dynamics of the various episodes of contention within Egypt. Tilly’s and Tarrow’s major theoretical intervention of brokerage is especially essential to understanding how certain episodes of contention helped generate the Egyptian Revolution of 2011.

The mechanism of brokerage can be understood as the creation of new connections between unconnected or weakly connected social sites. In other words, brokerage as a mechanism can connect groups or individuals with one another during periods of stability or contention (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004: 26). In Egypt, brokerage was generated by regional events, which promoted the creation of new collective actors and identities. Brokerage within the Egyptian context became a “relational mechanism for mobilization”, which essentially increased social interaction and uncertainty within the public sphere (McAdam et al. 2004: 26).
As Tilly and Tarrow make clear, environmental, cognitive and relational mechanisms combine to form broader processes like mobilizations. Within Egypt, however, unprecedented and experimental episodes of contention enabled brokerage and created new spaces of dissent along with an increasingly evident us/them boundary formation. The process of mobilization created space(s) of uncertainty where the unspoken hegemonic order of society could be further challenged. Initial mobilizations were not aimed against the regime; however, they did create the possibility for the organization of anti-regime groups by challenging seemingly solidified norms. As we will see, the pro-Intifada and anti-Iraq war demonstrations were especially critical to the creation of the Egyptian revolution because they facilitated the creation of a network of activists, which eventually united previously disconnected groups and individuals into cooperative environments.

Dissent has always existed in Egypt, but some moments create long lasting if not permanent imprints, while others do not. This paper will focus on those episodes which generated profound alterations. Therefore, I maintain the argument, outlined in three sections, that:

1. The pro-Intifada protests, inspired by the second Palestinian Intifada, would have a profound impact on the internal dynamics of Egyptian contention by beginning to move politics from internal social relations and into the public sphere. Furthermore, it created a space of initial experimentation where
although dissent was not directed at Mubarak; it did flirt with the validity of a decades old norm.

2. The impending U.S.-led Invasion of Iraq initiated an era of contentious street politics. The protests against the invasion of Iraq left an indelible mark on the public sphere by openly challenging Mubarak in large numbers; here was where a space of nascent contentious politics directed against the state was born.

3. The democracy movement, primarily Kifaya, was built on both of these spaces and created new opportunities for future dissent. Although still in an experimental stage Kifaya materialized into a movement that’s sole purpose was to change the status-quo.

These three major events occurred over the terrain of the public and would help generate the revolution of 2011 by challenging the unspoken hegemonic order of society. The unprecedented convergence of disparate political networks into an organized network of activists, primarily via an NGO in solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, would eventually evolve into an anti-war movement in 2003 and subsequently into an umbrella organization which directly challenged the state.

To be clear, there have been other crucial events that provoked the Egyptian evolution of 2011, specifically the Tunisian revolution of 2011 and the response to the brutal beating and death suffered by Khalid Said at the hands of two secret police officers in 2010. These events, however, did not independently break the taboos of public protest within Egypt. In Marc Lynch’s book, *The Arab Uprising: The Unfinished Revolutions of the New Middle East*, Lynch observes that the taboo of public protest was
not the formidable factor in convincing potential participants to take to the streets on January 25th, 2011:

“The real challenge facing the organizers of the January 25 demonstration was not that they would be breaking a taboo against public protest; the challenge was in persuading potential participants that they could succeed. ”(Lynch 2012: 85; my emphasis)

The cyber-activism that brought attention to the death suffered by Khalid Said and more critically the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia undoubtedly persuaded many Egyptians that change was feasible via street politics. However, breaking the taboo of public protest along with the creation of once absent networks of activists can be traced to the pro-Intifada protests, the anti-Iraq war protests in 2003, and the subsequent creation of the democracy movement.

Furthermore, these three episodes allow us to analyze the dynamics of contention from a global perspective. For example, the contentious revitalization of long-standing transnational kinships and connections via ‘illegal’ protests were generated by external conflicts, which had serious internal consequences for the state. Unprecedented mobilizations against external injustices within a country that had little space for low-risk environments of mass mobilizations created the possibility for a critical space that focused on internal injustices. As we will see, this overlap and eventual transition from the global to the local happened across space and time. In other words, single events of contention were neither necessary nor sufficient for the creation of the Egyptian revolution. Rather, critical mobilizations occurring at different
times and spaces, together, created the necessary space for actors and organizations to form the networks of activists that eventually mobilized over internal injustices.

DOXA & OPINION

The Egyptian state has never attempted to become what Antonio Gramsci labeled the “night-watchmen of the liberal state”; however, a delicate balance of hegemony and coercion did exist (2000: 235). When the status quo was not continually threatened, Mubarak did not use the same degree of coercion as many regional dictatorships, “but this looser rule is a strength of the Egyptian system, not a weakness...Egypt’s regime, like those of other Arab states, relies on a mix of co-option and coercion to ensure its rule” (Byman 2005: 75). Therefore, as the cycles of protests shifted the balance in their favor, the state became increasingly more coercive and thus increasingly delegitimized by the people it attempted to control. As a result, the mechanism of boundary formation, the creation of us/them distinctions between the state and its contentious challengers, became increasingly solidified and widespread (Tilly and Tarrow 2007: 215). By 2011 the divide between ‘the people’ and their state was clear, and a continuous change in identity on the side of the Egyptian people versus the state (boundary shift) became increasingly evident throughout the public sphere. The weakening of the state would not have been possible without the unconventional creation of public discourse through contentious politics. Ultimately, these historical changes in Egyptian politics challenged fundamental self-evident universals that have privileged the regime.
The aforementioned interlinked events allowed the undiscussed to be more openly conversed. The boundary between the universe of the undiscussed (doxa) and the universe of discourse (opinion) was concrete prior to these experimental episodes of contentious politics. Prior to these events, the universe of doxa was effectively solidified which created a norm of compliance. The essential mechanism to this compliance has been the broad acceptance of the emergency law, which was perceived as an unshakable “truth” in Mubarak’s Egypt. Enacted in 1958 and enforced after the Six-Day-War in 1967, it has affected virtually all Egyptians. The two elements of the law most relevant to this paper are the state’s right to arrest and imprison anyone without warrant and the banning of all protests without government approval (Ghonim 2012: 2).

The emergency law has clearly served as an effective tool for maintaining political power over the people, but more importantly; it has created the cultural hegemony that saturates many sectors of Egyptian society. With exception to a three year hiatus under late president Anwar Sadat; the emergency law is part and parcel of civil society. As such, contesting the validity of this tool was a direct threat to the durability of the regime. Therefore, we ought to view the repeated public disregard of this essential state apparatus through unauthorized protests, as public attacks against the unspoken hegemonic order of society.

The pro-Intifada demonstrations were the first events of mass contentious politics during Mubarak’s presidency, even though they were directed at Israel and not publically at Mubarak. The state’s weakness was exposed when the mere presence of
bodies in the street challenged the hegemony of the emergency law. In a sense, the pro-Intifada protests helped move society from an unquestioned sphere of truths and into the sphere of discourse. However, such a fracture was only a condition of possibility, not a cause. The anti-war movement against the invasion of Iraq actually crossed a boundary, into the realm of cyclical contentious politics. The anti-war movement crossed ideological fault-lines and would culminate into an unprecedented occupation of Tahrir Square; past truths, like not publically challenging the regime, were broken. Two years after the occupation of Tahrir, a broad-based coalition of activists known as Kifaya, attempted and briefly entered the “universe of discourse”. Kifaya briefly challenged the state, while a new discourse between orthodoxy and heterodoxy permeated throughout Egyptian society. In the end, these three separate yet interlinked events initiated a historical change to the point where the undiscussed became discussed, consequentially opening a new chapter in Egyptian politics.

Pierre Bourdieu’s work sheds light on breaking the self-evident through crisis. The truths implanted by the Egyptian state are by no means natural; however, they did become norms on a societal level. Similarly, crisis, in this case through contentious politics, moved society from one boundary and into another: “Crisis is a necessary condition for a questioning of doxa but not in itself a sufficient condition for the production of a critical discourse” (Bourdieu 1977: 169). In Egypt, breaking such norms required episodic, public, and collective crises against the interests of the dominant power holders.
Collective crises were made up of a series of contentious repertoires that were present in all three waves of public dissent. Repertoires of contention, refers to the familiar and historically created arrays of claim-making performances, like the sit-in or strike (Tilly 2010: preface vvi). As frequency of repertoire increases, opportunities and threats are analyzed by each side and strategically adjusted to benefit the interests of each party. In this sense, tools were utilized by the state. Once these coercive tools were challenged, the cycles of protests accelerated, challenging them as well as the orthodoxy of the state’s hegemonic control of institutionalized power. Bourdieu tells us: “The dominant classes have an interest in defending the integrity of doxa or, short of this, of establishing in its place the necessary imperfect substitute, orthodoxy” (Bourdieu 1977: 169). In Egypt the Integrity of doxa was publically impugned by the democracy movement and subsequently the government, in its weaker state, resorted to repressive violence in an attempt to implement the orthodoxy of power. To be clear, the threat of violent repression has existed for decades in Egypt. The state’s reaction to the first-ever openly anti-Mubarak movement is what makes this particular instance(s) of repression unique and in turn reveals a weakness that would be capitalized upon during the 2011 revolution.

This weakness became public when the integrity of the state’s “absolute truth” was questioned, temporarily restored, and then repeatedly questioned through more cycles of protests. Contentious politics emerges when opportunities broaden, potential for new alliances are present, and “when they reveal the opponents vulnerability” (Tarrow 1998: 23). The vulnerability of the hegemonic order, that had gripped Egypt for
decades, became increasingly more visible since March 2003 (first anti-war
demonstration) and more so in December 2004 (first publically organized anti-Mubarak
demonstration), when all three elements of contentious politics were in play.

These historical changes created opportunities for brokerage between previously
unconnected peoples and groups. During periods of contentious politics, brokerage
became the relational mechanism for mobilization where increased interaction among
previously disconnected networks caused them to discover the common sentiment of
frustration against the status quo (Tarrow 2004: 26). The new collective actors created
by this brokerage may have temporally disappeared after increased state aggression,
but the state’s hegemonic control was publically challenged and permanently affected.

PRO-INTIFADA ACTIVISM

The inception of the second Palestinian Intifada in September 2000 triggered
“the largest and most radical spontaneous demonstrations in the Arab world since the
first Gulf War” (El-Mahdi 2009: 93). This externally generated environmental social
mechanism would eventually set off a chain of cognitive and relational mechanisms
throughout Egypt’s rigid political structure. The initial manifestations of public protests
took place at various university campuses. The supposed first act of protest occurred
shortly after the gruesome images of a 12-year old Palestinian boy being shot dead in
his father’s arms were aired in Egypt where students at Cairo University protested and
threw rocks at riot police. A few days after this event, roughly 6000 students attempted
to storm the Israeli Embassy, but were dispersed by security forces. It was becoming
evident that an unprecedented wave of student activism was rapidly permeating an ostensibly “apolitical” sector of society within the Mubarak era (Farag 2000).

Eventually, the protests would include small demonstrations led by actors, entertainers, high school students, and from many prominent political parties, including the Muslim Brotherhood (primarily the youth faction), the nationalist liberal Wafd Party, and the socialist Tagammu Party. For the most part, the major political parties focused their anger towards Israel, while issuing statements urging Mubarak to close the Israeli Embassy in Cairo. In relation to the students, the political parties appeared “to have been shy, if not intimidated by the public reaction” (Farag 2000). To say the least, the unity amongst the diverse political parties and historically antagonistic ideological groups that was present during the 2011 uprising was lacking. Furthermore, spatial and temporal unity was practically nonexistent, rather separate ephemeral events that sparked throughout Egypt at different places and times resulted in a consistency of outcome. In other words, the amalgamation of the various detached sites of protests into a unified mass in a defined area, like Tahrir Square, never happened.

The apogee of the student protests in Egypt occurred in the 1970s when hundreds of thousands of students from different universities occupied Tahrir Square and demanded that Anwar Sadat attack Israel to reclaim occupied land. The nature of student activism changed in 1979 when “the government clipped the students' wings by passing a new university law which forbade political activity by students—effectively confining student demonstrations to the campuses” (Schemm 2002). This law
effectively broke the possibility of student mobilization beyond loose university-to-university networks. Low-risk mobilization of the various universities was an obstacle, not only due to the spatial reality, but also the university law which circumscribed student-state battles “at the university gates—usually far away from the rest of the population” (Schemm: 2002).

In such a restrictive environment, “ecology-dependent” dynamics of mobilization may have been essential for a more formidable protest event (Zhao 1998: 1495). This is especially true when considering that during this period the authoritarian environment in Egypt had left little space for low-risk spaces of mass mobilizations. Zones of toleration were few and therefore needed to be facilitated through other means. Consequently, these spatial disparities between the various protests throughout Cairo’s separate student collectivities and the juridical means of control were to the state’s advantage.

The only time during the pro-Palestinian protests where space, time, and differing ideologies converged was in the form of NGOs, primarily the Egyptian Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada (ECSPI). Founded by a coalition of the Egyptian left, the ECSPI was joined by Islamists, Nasserists, and women’s rights groups, among others. The committee collected money, food, and medical supplies to be sent to the Gaza strip, organized boycotts of American and Israeli products, developed mailing lists, and formed petitions to close the Israeli embassy in Cairo. The broad-based effort towards sending aid to Palestinians was tolerated by the regime and
“provided the major centers for organizing and mobilizing solidarity actions” (Shukrallah 2002: 46).

Under the umbrella of Palestinian aid and solidarity, the ECSPI created a network of previously disconnected groups and people into a cooperative environment. The ECPSI also created a new political space needed for future brokerage. “For the first time in modern Egyptian history, the committee had members of rival political factions” (El-Mahdi 2009: 94). Although, the ECSPI created a space where it was acceptable for differing ideologies to comingle, at times they participated out of interest for their public image. For instance, the Muslim Brotherhood did not necessarily intend on joining the leftist, but rather were forced to bow “to the pressure from its youth, who were not happy with a complaisant stand vis-à-vis the authorities” (El-Hamalawy 2007). Thus, the stage was set for future brokerage, not immediate coalescence amongst the rivals. In the short run, this brokerage did little to threaten Mubarak; however, in retrospect it is clearly visible that these initial acts of collective activism created new spaces of tolerated contention and a discourse between the state and the growing movement of activists.

During these critical months, contention, politics, and collective action came together on a national scale to form the first link of a consequential series of interlinked episodes of contentious politics leading up to the events of 2011 (Tarrow and Tilly 2007: 9). Although this was a breaking point of a new era of activism within Egypt, it did not set off an immediate cycle of contentious politics against the state. The protests were
episodic, occurred in public, and there was interaction between those making the claims (demonstrators) and ‘others’ (Egyptian State), however; prima facie it’s not clear whether the state’s interests were directly threatened. This is especially true when considering that the Palestinian Intifada generated spontaneous, as well as state-sponsored peaceful marches and demonstrations. A closer analysis reveals that although the anger was overwhelmingly directed against Israel, the spontaneous uprisings did threaten the interests of the Egyptian state by challenging the legitimacy of the decades old emergency law. The contingent nature of these protests on unforeseen external events caught Mubarak by surprise, but Mubarak acted tactically by allowing some protests to persist. What Mubarak didn’t foresee was the new space created for future contentious events.

The protests generated by the Intifada translated into a mass outpouring of rage against Israel, but not the Egyptian government, at least not rampantly. As Cairo based journalist, Ashraf Khalil states in his book *Liberation Square*: “Among the protestors, much of the internal conflict centered around whether or not to turn their frustrations with Israel against the Mubarak regime” (Khalil 2011: 37). Clearly, brokerage amongst the protestors here was critical to the difference in tone during the next mass wave of contention in 2003. Nevertheless, the anti-Israeli protests marked a new period of street politics, which is still vibrant today. “Since the beginning of the second Palestinian Intifada, demonstrations (though often small and encircled by large security presences) have become an almost weekly feature of Egyptian life” (Schemm: 2003). This era essentially created the uncertainty that the government could no longer
maintain complete control over collective action. The state’s delicate balance between coercion and tactical toleration was threatened. This delicate balance allowed Mubarak to have a monopoly over when, how, and if collective action was conducted, which was important since the regime’s economic outcome was withering away along with its control of “illegal” protests.

Journalist and member of the Revolutionary Socialists (RA), Hossam el-Hamalawy, participated in the pro-Palestine protests, the subsequent anti-Iraq war protests, and became a leading member of the Kefaya movement in 2004. In his widely read article in the Guardian, “Egypt's revolution has been 10 years in the making”, El-Hamalawy traces the 2011 Egyptian Revolution to a chain reaction connected to the autumn 2000 pro-Palestinian protests:

“Only after the Palestinian intifada broke out in September 2000 did tens of thousands of Egyptians take to the streets in protest – probably for the first time since 1977. Although those demonstrations were in solidarity with the Palestinians, they soon gained an anti-regime dimension, and police showed up to quell the peaceful protests. The president, however, remained a taboo subject, and I rarely heard anti-Mubarak chants.” (El-Hamalawy: 2011)

Perhaps the transnationally inspired nature of the protest explains why Mubarak tolerated the pro-Palestinian protests, which was a break from the traditional reactionary responses by the state. Security forces were utilized primarily to avert
crowds from reaching the Israeli Embassy and demonstrations were often dispersed with tear gas.

Furthermore, the state did permit various anti-Israeli protests to take place, and partially heeded to the demands of the people by adopting a more confrontational stance towards Israel. Following the protests, the Egyptian regime’s harsher tone against Israel along with the recalling the Egyptian ambassador from Israel did little to shake the peaceful relations between the two sovereigns. More relevantly, the attempted placation on behalf of the state demonstrates that it did not remain indifferent or merely antagonistic to the protestor’s ‘illegally organized’ demands through street protests.

In short, Mubarak’s response to the first ever unauthorized mass protest was a break with the overwhelmingly coercive stance towards dissent of the past. This regionally instigated rupture in hegemonic order within Egypt had a lasting effect on Egypt’s public sphere which can be traced to the revolution in 2011. Essentially, the shift from internal social relations to contentious street politics within Mubarak’s Egypt has its embryonic roots in the pro-Intifada protests and was further provoked during the anti-Iraq war protests in 2003.

ANTI-IRAQ WAR DEMONSTRATIONS

Leading up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, anti-war protestors again poured into the streets of Cairo for two consecutive days. “Cairo had witnessed two days of protests like nothing seen since the 1970s, complete with a day-long occupation of the
central Tahrir Square” (Schemm 2003). This time the protestors vacillated between anti-war slogans and anti-regime anger, focus shifted from regional events to internal realities. "Baghdad is Cairo, Jerusalem is Cairo" and "we want Egypt to be free, life has become bitter” were common slogans during the protests (Howeidy 2003). Needless to say, the strident public display of anti-regime sentiment was unprecedented during Mubarak’s presidency; this was the initial test of the regime’s, once stable, hegemony over unauthorized protests and the fear-barrier.

The most critical days during this period were the massive protests that occurred on March 20th and 21st, where Tahrir Square was occupied for the first time since a leftist-led student movement occupied the square in 1972. The protestors had found their space for contentious amalgamation, which was previously lacking. Environmental, cognitive, and relational mechanisms would combine to permanently transform Egyptian politics. Cognitive mechanisms would alter the collective perceptions of the people, while relational mechanisms would create connections among groups, networks, and individuals. Essentially, the first occupation of Tahrir “was a key turning point on the road to revolution” (Khalili 2011: 40).

Not only was this the first time that large crowds called for the regimes downfall, but a broader “repertoire of contention” (inherited forms of collective action) was born. According to Tilly repertoire “helps describe what happens by identifying a limited set of routines that learned, shared, and acted out through a relatively deliberate process of choice” (Tilly 1998: 30). These routines are usually created at the “edges of well-
established routines”, like a demonstration. In this case, the new repertoire would be the occupation of Cairo’s most important plaza, which proved to be a new challenge for the state: “…the square belonged to the demonstrators on that day. For about 12 hours, they wandered almost bemused across it’s suddenly car-less expanse…Riot police were present in vast numbers, but only on the edges of the square” (Schemm 2003).

This new repertoire, like the modern-day sit-in, was based on autonomous forms of association in which students, Islamists, Nasserists, and new activists swelled to over 40,000 in and around Tahrir Square (El-Mahdi 2009: 95). Thus, Egyptian street politics during this period matured in the sense that association shifted from ideological fault lines to collective association that crossed differing political ideologies and class. A combination of emails and text messages were utilized to organize a mass protest of coordinated collective action based off loose ties, not homogeneous groups of differing ideologies. Contention created new actors and identities and connected previously isolated activists into a more homogenous mass with a shared goal.

The day after the takeover of Tahrir, security forces locked down the square to prevent another occupation. On March 21st the tactics shifted from the mass collective occupation of Tahrir to small groups of rioters clashing with police that eventually converged to form a group of 10,000 demonstrators that “overwhelmed units of riot police and set fire to a water truck busy reloading one of the water cannons. Marching along the Corniche, they stopped to torch the poster of Mubarak outside the ruling party headquarters and burn all the foreign flags outside the Nile Hilton” (Schemm
Tarrow accurately observed that violence is the easiest form of collective action for smaller groups and has the power to attract or repel people with alacrity. In this case violence seemed to repel potential activists and subsequently the demonstration died down within a week.

Ultimately, it was during these demonstrations where a new era of contentious politics against the Egyptian state became a reality. A new era was born since coordinated collective action was increasingly being conducted over preexisting ideological fault lines and for the first time in Mubarak’s presidency demonstrators openly and widely protested against him specifically, as well as those in his regime. This new era was built upon the space created by the anti-intifada protests, which experimentally challenged the rigidity of the emergency law and eventually proved difficult to reclaim by the state. The withering of the emergency law’s legitimacy was further confirmed by the state when the interior minister “issued a statement prohibiting street demonstrations without permits, basically a reminder that the emergency law bans public demonstrations” (Howeidy 2003).

The emergency law would continue to lose legitimacy after the anti-Iraq war protests. As we will see in the next section, the reaction to the invasion of Iraq created another space where a broad coalition of old and new activists became characterized as the democracy movement: “The democracy movement should therefore be understood in the context of a series of mutually reinforcing initiatives within which shared networks and overlapping leaderships grew in confidence, learning strategy and tactics
and developing a space in which they could overcome their ideological differences” (El-Mahdi 2009: 96). The Invasion of Iraq was the original spark to the new recurrence of public demonstrations against the regime via street politics. Contentious claims directly contradicted the state’s interests, became increasingly more episodic, and contentious politics moved from the private and into the public.

The coalition formation that took place during the Pro-Palestinian protests in 2000 spilled over into the anti-war movement, and this period would spill over into future waves of contention. For example, “the left-leaning Palestine solidarity committee [formed during the 2000 protests] evolved into an anti-war movement, convening small street actions, which exploded into running clashes with the police in downtown Cairo on March 19 and 20, 2003” (El-Hamalawy 2003). Shortly after these events, many leaders of the EPCSPI faced legal intimidation and prison sentences. Therefore, the pro-Palestinian episode and the anti-war movement were not just connected via previously created spaces of contention, but tangibly connected via evolving coalitions of activists too. The trajectory of all three movements was repeatedly reinforced (El-Mahdi 2009: 96).

The profound impact that the invasion of Iraq had on Egypt in 2003 created the necessary spaces of contention that would repeatedly threaten Mubarak during 2004. For instance, this era enabled the increasingly habitual nature of dissent that overshadowed particular political agendas and essentially moved politics into the modern era of contentious street politics. Once again, on March 20th 2004, protestors
composed primarily of Islamists, Nasserists, liberals, and leftists marked the first anniversary of the invasion of Iraq with demonstrations that again “turned quickly to expressions of outrage at Egypt’s economic woes” (Moustafa 2004). This time the anger was directed at price increases in staple-foods, which was perceived by many as a symptom of Prime Minister Nazif’s accelerated pace of economic liberalization. Subsequently, many food items were increasing in price three times as quickly as they did in 2000-2002 and the impact was felt across the country. Unlike the bread-riots of 1977, there was no publically known threat to officially accept an IMF plan to end Egypt’s subsidization of wheat, rather the cause of the inflated prices were directly connected to the drastic increase in prices due to the behind-the-scene market reforms of Prime Minister Nazif. Therefore, in a sense the drastic increase in staple foods, regardless of their cause, was an important environmental mechanism that affected “people’s capacity to engage in contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2004: 25).

Indeed, environmental changes played a crucial role in fueling anger against the regime in March 2004; most notably the assassination of Hamas’s spiritual leader, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin by Israel on the 22nd of March, just two days after the anti-war protests began. Death proved to be yet another mobilizing factor in Egypt. Mobilizations around deaths are common, but what is different about the mobilization around this specific death is that reactions started in Egypt within a few hours of Sheikh Ahmed Yassin’s demise. The increased penetration of satellite television was another environmental mechanism that increasingly threatened the state. The erosion of the
state-controlled flow of information by way of satellite television created what Marc Lynch has coined as the “new Arab public” (Lynch 2012: 3). This phenomenon has doubtlessly challenged the authoritarian regime’s ability to filter information. Al-Jazeera’s constant coverage of regional conflicts would have an especially galvanizing effect on the Egyptian public and is arguably an essential element to the creation of the anti-war demonstrations.

The protests, engendered by the invasion of Iraq, created crowds that were no longer apprehensive about directly challenging the state: “More than 30,000 Egyptians fought the police in downtown Cairo, briefly taking over Tahrir Square, and burning down Mubarak’s billboard” (El-Hamalawy 2003). Expectedly, Mubarak’s response was far more violent and reactionary than the state’s reaction to the overwhelmingly peaceful pro-Palestinian protests three years prior to this event. The U.S. lobby group, Human Rights Watch, reported various cases of beatings and torture, and hundreds of arrests. Furthermore, two Egyptian Parliament members (a Nasserist and an independent), were arrested for participating in the protests. Many activists utilized the familiar repertoire of throwing rocks or accessible objects at police. Riot police would respond by chasing the protestors and those they caught would be arrested, “According to official figures, 61 people were detained for up to 15 days after violent demonstrations in Cairo” (Black 2003). A Human Rights Watch report, released on March 24, 2003, issued a detailed account of the excessive force used by the state:
“Police have arrested leaders of movements protesting the Iraq war and Israeli actions in the Occupied Territories; journalists, professors, and students; and onlookers, as well as children as young as 15 years old..."The crackdown many feared has come," said Hanny Megally, executive director of the Middle East and North Africa division of Human Rights Watch. "Fundamental freedoms in Egypt are now under serious threat." (Human Rights Watch 2003)

It’s clear that this wave of contention was starkly different from previous episodes. The occupation of Tahrir, along with the blatant dismissal of not only the state’s laws but of its president broke ostensibly ossified taboos. The violent clashes with police, the harsh crackdown by the state, and the repertoires of contention were more characteristic of Egypt’s 2011 revolution than with previous episodes of contention. After the large protests withered away in March, demonstrations in support of Palestinian and Iraqi independence became regular incidents. “Although the Egyptian government still hems in demonstrations with an overwhelming security presence, the mere fact that protests are tacitly permitted outside the gates of university campuses marks a qualitative shift in Egyptian political life” (Moustafa 2004).

**BIRTH OF A DEMOCRACY MOVEMENT**

On December 12, 2004 a protest that was built upon various preceding bases of contentious episodes explicitly challenged Mubarak. “Many of the protesters knew one another from earlier gatherings to protest Israeli strikes on the Gaza strip and the U.S. invasion of Iraq” (Ghonim 2012: 32). The anti-war protests in 2003 fostered brokerage
and created a space for anti-Mubarak activism. Initially two groups were formed: *Kifaya* (Arabic for enough) and the Popular Campaign for Change, which was primarily composed of Marxists. These two groups fused together under the Kifaya banner, which also severed as an umbrella organization for anti-Mubarak activism (El-Hamalawy). Past bases of contention that shared experiences during the anti-Israeli and anti-war demonstrations united towards another collective claim.

The Kifaya organization, which became the unofficial pseudonym for the 2011 Egyptian revolution, caught the countries attention in 2004 by organizing multiple protests demanding the ouster of Mubarak and refusal to accept a shift in power to his son. Kifaya consisted of a broad range of ideological backgrounds who met through various protests since the Palestinian Intifada. Despite ideological differences, Kifaya was united by their “skepticism of legally recognized political parties and the futility of attempting to introduce any genuine reform in the Egyptian political system through the existing institutions” (Hopkins 2009: 50). Kifaya did not necessarily act on opportunity or threat, rather it created them. Indeed, it’s no surprise why only a few hundred people showed up to the first demonstration ever to call on ending the Mubarak presidency. The group was ostensibly secular and mostly composed of leftist intellectuals whom had a history of activism. The high risk associated with collective action directly against a repressive state sufficiently justifies the initial hesitation to be associated with a movement base like Kifaya. Rather, small demonstrations created opportunities by serving as a bellwether case of a democracy movement during an uncertain political context. In revealing potential allies and by exposing the state’s
weaknesses, Kifaya became an example of what effective movement formation should look like: based off loose ties, not homogenous, secular versus ideological, and working for change through contentious politics, not familiar institutions. In sum, weak ties sharing a common complaint led to a groundbreaking movement.

It is important to note that a unified political organization publically and explicitly challenging Mubarak was taboo before these movements surfaced. Kifaya managed to unite “a disparate collection of burgeoning movements among several sectors of Egyptian society” to oppose the status quo (Beinin 2005). Kifaya’s statement of principles listed two twin dangers: “the odious assault on Arab native soil (Palestine and Iraq), and a ‘repressive despotism’ pervading all aspects of the Egyptian political system” (EL-Mahdi 2009: 122). Although the group would occasionally allude to external causes, its primary focus was on internal concerns. In other words, Kifaya capitalized on the prevailing shift of protestors away from external causes and onto national struggles. The group argued it could support the Palestinian and Iraqi struggles by “starting with internal reform” (Oweidat 2008: 13).

The panoptical gaze of the state could no longer conveniently observe their subjects express their contestations outwards, but an increasingly politicized society began to reflect their gaze inwards at the watchman. In other words, contention directed at the state could no longer be hermetically internalized. One of the main proposals for reform of the Egyptian political system was not just an end of the Mubarak era by preventing the succession of his son Gamal, but also the “elimination of the
current unfounded economic monopoly and squandering of the wealth of the nation” (EL-Mahdi 2009: 90). It’s no surprise why a political organization, in an embryonic stage, became the moniker of the Egyptian Revolution: Kifaya drew in new and old activists under a banner that most could identify with. It “breathed life into Egyptian politics” (2009: 92).

What allowed a democracy movement to exist in a repressive state? I believe that the answer is two-fold; more changes in environmental mechanisms and timing. It’s true that in 2004 many Egyptians were uncertain whether the 76 year old Mubarak would run again for presidency or cede power to his son, either way the uncertainty created by the elections was an unpromising binary (Hopkins 2009: 47). As previously mentioned, no real critical opportunities existed for the democracy movement in 2004, so the “reductionist” Political Opportunity Structure theory that Kifaya’s “participant’s saw an opportunity in the upcoming elections does not suffice, since this was not the first plebiscite during Mubarak’s reign” (El-Mahdi 2009: 96). Additionally, at the time major institutional changes primarily took place at the economic level while the authoritarian element of the state remained rigid. Mubarak continued to practice what Sidney Tarrow (1998) labels selective repression. “The Egyptian public, particularly elements that oppose the current regime, are ignored or repressed” (Byman 2005: 75). Certain groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, faced limited repression and increasingly worked within state institutions and won parliamentary seats. Albeit, the authoritarian environment remained rigid, the spreading of technological changes
created pockets of free public-opinion that had become more familiar to the average citizen.

Mubarak realized history demonstrates that a government which rejects all opposition with repression will either destroy the opposition or lead to a revolutionary polarization (Tarrow 1998: 148). Therefore, Mubarak’s selective repression worked in the short-run since Kifaya’s strength flagged, but it also initiated a revolutionary polarization that followed its temporary extirpation. Mubarak’s increased loss of legitimacy began to accelerate with these protests and would only increase with the new organized campaign of anti-government messages circling the internet. The groups rise should therefore be analyzed “in light of cycles of contention that preceded it” (El-Mahdi 2009: 96). It was the preceding cycle of contention, which began with the anti-war protests that gave life to Kifaya: “The anti-war movement, successor of the pro-intifada movement, evolved again by the end of 2004 into an anti-Mubarak movement” (El-Hamalawy 2003).

These cycles of contention energized Kifaya through “shared personnel and leadership, through communities of protest, through collectively learned tactics, and through creation of space for overcoming ideological divisions” (El-Mahdi 2009: 96). Ultimately, the democracy movement led by Kifaya created further uncertainty about the legitimacy of the Mubarak government. In essence, “Kefaya changed the game in a crucial and permanent way” (Khalil 2011: 46). It exposed that the government was forced to resort to coercion in order to quell unacceptable forms of dissent that
continued to delegitimize crucial elements of the emergency law, created new opportunities for future dissent, and recharged the Egyptian collective perception of future possibilities of protest directed internally versus externally.

After Kifaya’s demise, worker-led demonstrations in Egypt increased throughout the country. Most strikers demanded better wages, contracts, and job security. Over 100,000 workers were involved with such strikes in 2007 (El-Mahdi 2009: 100). The workers struggles that followed the demise of the democracy movements may have fought for different objectives, however, they both utilized once absent street-politics due to the era of contentious politics initiated through regional issues. On April 6th, 2008 violent riots ensued in the city of Mahalla al-Kubra. Workers from the textile factory (Egypt’s largest) clashed violently with police, resulting in many arrests and three deaths (Wolman 2008). Two volunteers for the centrist-liberal El-Ghad Party, Ahmad Maher and Israa Abdel-Kobra, created the April 6th Youth Movement Facebook page out of solidarity for the workers of El-Mahalla who were planning a strike on April 6th, 2008 to protest poor wages and soaring food prices. The April 6th movement adopted the amorphous and inclusive nature of past groups like Kifaya, and grew to 70,000 Facebook members.

The crumbling hegemony that once seemed solid was continuously weakened by years of breaking norms and regimes of truth. “In 2010 alone, there were around 700 strikes and protests organized by workers across the country” (Shehata 2011). By 2011, street politics became a normalized event that engulfed a nation-state where public
dissent was once an anomalous event. The possibility of such a phenomenon within a highly authoritarian environment did not happen overnight; rather, a decade of contentious political action and discourse precipitated the possibility of this act of contention, but it’s the collective response to the uprising of January 25th, 2011 which divulged the true nature of a regime that had become instinctively dependent upon repression against the expression of legitimate concerns by the average citizen.

CONCLUSION

Regional conflicts have played a vital role within Egypt’s sovereign borders; these external events essentially fueled an unprecedented participation in contentious politics, which subsequently generated the politicization of the public sphere. Indeed, the base of this struggle seems to be aimed at changing collective perceptions, so that a transition from orthodoxy and into an unknown universe of discourse is possible. The social interaction among subjects, challengers, and members of the state led to the development of contention needed to oust Mubarak in 2011. Unfortunately, the ideological fault lines that were overlooked during the organization of the Egyptian revolution are again becoming focal points of Egyptian politics. Pluralism and Regionality have had remarkable effects on the mobilization of disparate groups of people within an authoritarian environment, but only time will tell if further social interaction in ‘post-revolutionary’ Egypt will lead to new cycles of contention or a return to the static realm of doxa.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


