

Transcending Meta-Narratives: Unpacking the Revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia

Written by Asya El-Meehy

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ASYA EL-MEEHY, MAY 8 2011

Viewed from a distance the ongoing protests that have swept across Arab countries seem broadly similar. Youths play a predominant role in spurring them through social media, broad segments of society seem to bandwagon with the protestors, and Tunisia's "Jasmine revolution" has provided a blueprint for these grassroots mobilizations. Belligerent regimes respond by employing a mix of repression, new subsidies, employment programs and political reforms in an effort to stem the tide of change. Pivotaly, the army's stance seems to determine outcomes that range from brutal suppression and/or civil war in Syria, and Libya to relatively peaceful regime change in Egypt and Tunisia. One of the most dominant explanations of the mobilizations is that the protests are born out of systemic economic pressures, which in the Middle Eastern contexts coincide with fundamental contradictions between free markets and authoritarian rule. In this view, the world recession's impact on migrant workers' remittances, as well as rising food prices provided the impetus for the revolts in the region: "It's the economy stupid!" as famously coined by Bill Clinton. Both Egypt and Tunisia rely on import of wheat, whose price has doubled between March 2010 and February 2011. Further, the World Bank's food price index rose by 15 percent between October 2010 and January 2011 (World Bank 2011). While some analysts draw on the "steam-boiler" analogy linking price hikes to the occurrence of collective protests, others emphasize the perceived violations of culturally defined socio-economic entitlements as triggers for the revolts.

While economic grievances are not entirely irrelevant, the structural meta-narrative, just like the cultural one, is problematic. Such arguments have by and large echoed commonly held views of the nature, and dynamics of, popular protest in the Middle East while glossing over important differences among the countries experiencing the protests. In this narrative, the "Arab street" is a shorthand for defensive action by impulsive and sometimes violent crowds. Underpinning most structural explanations is the treatment of popular mobilizations in the Middle East as monolithic phenomena rather than distinct socio-political events with important internal differences. The urban poor and the marginalized are traditionally cast as the main actors in the region's mobilizations, with little focus on the roles of "political entrepreneurs," or vertical linkages with formal institutions, segments of the local elite...etc. Egypt's massive 1977 riots, which were triggered by a 33% rise in food prices and led to an official death toll of 77 people in Cairo alone, historically epitomized such "spontaneous" popular mobilization in the region. On these bases, the region's specialists have long argued that, as long as welfare institutions (particularly food subsidies) remain officially unchanged, Arab authoritarian regimes will be stable. The second related assumption is that society will remain depoliticized as long as middle classes continue to have access to the state's largesse. My analysis of the successful revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia seeks to highlight the shortcomings of the structural narrative, and to develop an explanation rooted in the contextual political economies.

Ironically, both Egypt and Tunisia stand out in the region not only as top neoliberal reformers with economies rapidly growing at over 6 percent, but also because their authoritarian regimes officially maintained key social contract institutions and pursued hidden retrenchment consistent with the interests of their middle classes. Since 1990, the welfare state in both contexts retrenched with per-capita social expenditures sharply falling as a percentage of the GDP relative to the early 1980s, and remained stagnant in the new millennium. Nonetheless, the implementation of structural adjustment reforms did not coincide with the overhaul of welfare institutions or the introduction of targeted cash support for the poor.

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Food subsidy systems remained officially in place and universally accessible, but fewer and lower quality items were now covered. Egypt's universally subsidized *baladi* bread notoriously deteriorated in both size and quality, but the regime routinely committed itself to its "social pricing." Employment-based pension systems that generously benefit the middle classes on a pay-as-you-go basis were preserved with coverage impressively exceeding 40 percent of the labor force. Further, growing segments of the informal and rural sectors were even incorporated under differential insurance-based systems.[1] On balance, however, the middle classes in both countries remained the primary beneficiaries of social protection schemes. Welfare reforms served to nominally preserve social rights, but reduced net transfers to the poor. By the mid-2000s, levels of indirect taxation, which typically disproportionately affect the lower classes, significantly outpaced social spending, thereby rendering welfare regimes overall less redistributive. Although estimates of poverty are unreliable – given that official poverty lines are set artificially low relative to per capita gross national income levels – both Egypt and Tunisia saw a rise in their incidences of poverty following the onsets of the financial, food and fuel crises in recent years.

Despite deliberate efforts by the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes to carefully avoid political instability in the course of economic liberalization, two sets of structural tensions rooted in the operation of markets seem to have contributed to protest action. Although officially not among the countries hardest hit with inflation, which in their cases is estimated in the low range of 3 to 7 percent (World Bank, 2009), the middle classes experienced growing relative deprivation in both contexts. Perceptions of well-being are often tied to *relative income* and *relative consumption* of particular goods rather than absolute per capita income levels, which reached \$US 2070 and \$US 3720 in Egypt and Tunisia respectively in 2010. The Gini coefficient – a standardized widely used measure of inequality – in Tunisia rose slightly from 0.39 to 0.40 while that of Egypt remained officially constant at 0.34 over the last decade. Compared to other emerging markets, like China, Brazil, Turkey and South Africa, both countries seemed to fare well in terms of class disparities (UNDP, 2009). However, using Gini coefficient measures to capture relative deprivation can in fact be misleading, not just because of dodgy data, but also conceptual problems. We confront the questions of whether middle class protestors compared themselves to others in their age group, their fellow Arabs, or to global lifestyles?

New research on the economics of happiness in developing contexts indicates that those who are just above the poverty line (i.e. lower middle class groups) tend to have higher perceptions of vulnerability and deprivation as well as a lower sense of welfare compared to the poor (Graham, 2005). Although we lack similar data on the Middle East, income distribution patterns show that large segments of the populations in Egypt and Tunisia live just above poverty lines. Subjective perceptions of well-being among these constituencies are likely to have been low. Further, there are several empirical trends that highlight deepening relative deprivation among the middle classes in recent years. Public sector employment has slowed down since the 1990s in Egypt and Tunisia, but thanks to rigid labor market structures and wage policies, it remained the preference of middle class university graduates who prioritize job security, social status, and possibility for moonlighting. Declining real wages in this sector, however, became the rallying cry of the middle classes.

As a result, large-scale campaigns for adequate minimum wage legislation were waged in recent years by the opposition as well as trade unions. While in both cases, foreign-linked elements of the bourgeoisie, neoliberal minded technocrats, as well as upper segments of the middle classes (with marketable skills in the booming information technology, real estate and tourism sectors) were prospering and came to constitute a new dominant social coalition, large segments of society were left behind. As the rich moved to new-gated communities, Cairo's *ashwaeyat* or shantytowns now included middle class families that could not afford housing elsewhere. While shopping malls, such as Cairo's mega mall "City Stars," became the new urban centers, the middle classes were relegated to "virtual" consumption in these new "global" spaces.

Unemployment among youths (15-29 years old), who account for 29 percent of the population in Egypt and Tunisia, is arguably another source of economic grievances. Adoption of neoliberal development models was associated with jobless growth and growing de-proletariatization. Overall unemployment was officially estimated at 15 percent in Tunisia and 10 percent in Egypt during 2010, but stood at 30 and 25 percents among youths in the 15-29 age bracket. Indeed, university graduates are the group most affected; in Tunisia it takes on average 28 months for a recent graduate to land his first job while in Egypt the period is 24 months (Stampini, 2011; Assaad, 2007).

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The inability of the private sector to create employment opportunities, and the slowing of public sector employment, led both states to promote Micro-Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) as a solution to rising unemployment. The agencies entrusted with the extension of subsidized credit for small entrepreneurs and the development of this sector of the economy, however, were ineffective. In particular, the Social Fund for Development in Egypt and Tunisia's National Solidarity Fund 26-26 were closely tied to the ruling regimes' patronage networks, and studies indicate that their targeted allocations were politicized. Although Tunisia's record is considered relatively more successful, in neither cases the MSME sectors became vibrant engines of economic growth, with modest contributions to manufacturing value added, high closure rates, and limited numbers of jobs created. According to one study, rates of entrepreneurial activity – or percentages of adult population who are trying to establish a business, have established a startup, or own an existing business – are a mere 13.1 and 9.4 in Egypt and Tunisia respectively (Stevenson, 2010).

Overall, however, these general economic trends cannot adequately explain the 2011 revolts. This is the case since many countries experienced similar, if not worse, economic conditions, but also because the structural narrative, which echoes earlier analyses of the “Arab street,” can neither explain protest patterns nor account for divergent inner dynamics of revolt across the Egyptian and Tunisian cases. Although the two successful protests in Egypt and Tunisia bore important resemblances, there are clear differences in their inner dynamics; the spark for mobilization, the composition of protestors, their original demands, and their geographic patterns. Unlike food riots, the recent broad-based mobilizations were clearly proactive, and articulated explicit programs for reform as well as specific political goals. To varying degrees, these mobilizations involved complex durable social networks in addition to a variety of political organizations. Although the urban poor did partake in the protests, they were not their main driving forces. In other words, the wave of popular protest the region has been witnessing is substantially different from earlier forms of collective resistance.

While acknowledging the influence of market-based tensions, I argue that political structures and contextual factors hold the key to understanding the revolts in Egypt and Tunisia, as well as patterns of similarity and difference across them. The spark for Egypt's protests was Khaled Saeed's case – a young upper-middle class businessman who was violently killed by the police in Alexandria in June of 2010 at an internet café. Pictures of Khaled Saeed surfaced on the internet and Facebook pages were established in his memory. The case outraged public opinion, and a series of protests by middle class youths were organized in order to bring the perpetrators to justice, and to highlight police brutality. In Tunisia, the self-immolation of a young street peddler, Mohamed Bouazzizi, whose desperate act came in reaction to being beaten by a female police officer and the state's confiscation of his goods, spurred a local revolt in the town of Sidi-Bouzyd around economic grievances. In response to the high level of police violence used against protestors in Sidi-Bouzyd, collective mobilization spread to other parts of the country and climaxed with a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Interior in the capital.

As different as the cases of Khaled Saeed and Bouazziz are, they both reflect the citizens' rejection of a particular form of state violence. States routinely employ concentrated violence and strong states approximate Max Weber's ideal of monopolizing the legitimate exercise of force in society. While everyday living under the Ben Ali and Mubarak authoritarian regimes entailed heavy restrictions on civil and political rights, encounters with the state were for the most part predictable with the authorities representing the only source of legitimate protection for the citizenry. But the incidents that sparked the revolt, represented a different kind of violence employed by the state, what Chares Tilly labeled “racketeer government” whereby the state seemed to intermittently become the source of threat to people's security, rather than the entity responsible for their protection (Tilly, 1985). The unpredictability of state violence, and the fact that millions saw themselves randomly becoming Khalid Seeds and Mohamed Bouzoukis prompted the kinds of unprecedented mobilizations the world has witnessed. It is not a coincidence that the millions of protestors in Egypt established popular committees to watch over neighborhoods and assumed the state's functions in Tahrir Square. They conducted security screening, provided medical care to the injured, distributed food, cleaned the street, and occasionally engaged in counter-violence to the regime's hired thugs. The utopia the protestors were fulfilling is one in which the state's arbitrary use of force or racketeer governance is curbed, and protection is extended with dignity for all.

In addition, two crucial aspects of the prevailing political contexts were conducive to successful revolts in Egypt and

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Tunisia. Far from constituting sudden “awakenings,” both countries had been witnessing sustained waves of protest in recent years and divisions among the elites coincided with the cross-class mobilization from below. In Tunisia, the revolution came on the heels of longstanding economic grievances in the impoverished Southwest mining areas of the country. In contrast to the affluent coastal towns, the regions of Sidi-Bouزيد and Gafsa had high levels of poverty, and unemployment levels were officially double the national rate at 30 percent (Gantin and Seddik, 2008). For much of 2008, the regions experienced a social uprising triggered by nepotistic employment practices by the biggest employer, CPG (Gafsa Phosphates Company), and poor working conditions. Demonstrations by unemployed youths, who were passed off by CPG, were accompanied by workers’ strikes, protests by families of the injured, and sit-ins involving the whole community. In the case of Egypt, the emergence of *Kefaya* (the Egyptian Movement for Change) in 2004 as a cross-ideological social movement calling for democratic reforms, was followed by the growth of grassroots collective action. Egyptians organized on the bases of shared workplace and professional concerns, religious identities, and also local neighborhoods. Between 2004 and 2010, it is estimated that 2 million people went on strike, and the country’s first independent trade unions (for real estate tax collectors and pharmacists) were born as a result of these efforts. These forms of collective action demonstrated that protests are possible, even if they are repressed, and that it is possible to extract concessions from the authoritarian state.

In the case of Tunisia, the fall of Ben Ali occurred following a division between the regime, which had the support of the police and security forces, on the one hand, and the professionalized army on the other hand. Opposition forces were effectively silenced or exiled, and the ruling party managed to win “elections” with over 90 percent of the vote. The armed forces, which were particularly marginalized over the last two decades, proactively interfered in this case to prevent the security forces from violently suppressing the protests. In contrast, the collapse of Mubarak regime was in part the result of divisions in the political class over the succession question. Within the National Democratic Party, the armed forces, the opposition, and the bourgeoisie, Gamal Mubarak’s rising power as well as his neoliberal agenda were deeply controversial. Unlike Tunisia, the army was forced to interfere in the wake of the security vacuum deliberately created by the regime to intimidate the protestors. As a result, the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) has been engaged in a push-pull dynamic with the protestors. In fact the, SCAF has only gone as far as indicting Mubarak and his family following sustained waves of mobilization by protestors and demands from *within* the army’s own ranks to bring the *ancien regime* to justice.

Although the Egyptian and Tunisian middle classes continued to have access to the state’s largesse, their growing relative deprivation, combined with the maintenance of nominal social rights, as well as the emergence of “racketeer governance,” translated into their political mobilization in opposition to the regimes in power. Although both revolts entailed broad cross-class alliances among the urban-based middle classes, as well as the rural and urban poor, the main actors and the inner dynamics of the protests were significantly different with important implications for the future of the polities. In Egypt, the protests began nation-wide on January 25th, although some parts of the country such as Suez witnessed higher levels of mobilization and violence. Here, the urban middle classes were the main driving force and the initial demands of the protestors reflected the primacy of political concerns namely democratic change, and respect for human rights. The alliance with the rural and urban poor has been precarious, with successive governments pushing for an end to strikes and workers’ mobilizations. In Tunisia, the protests began by the rural poor against unemployment and high prices. After the state’s repressive response against residents of Sidi-Bouزيد, the protests were transformed into a political movement demanding civil rights and the ouster of Ben Ali. In contrast to Egypt, where labor joined the protestors in the third week of mobilization, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) was at the forefront in coordinating and leading the mobilization. Attempts to co-opt UGTT figures into the Ganoushi government following Ben Ali’s ouster were resisted by the rank and file. As a result, the cross-class alliance in Tunisia looks more stable and thus more likely to protect the interests of the marginalized.

In conclusion, the cases of Egypt and Tunisia demonstrate the shortcomings of meta-narratives that emphasize systemic structural narratives, and reproduce the problematic view of the “Arab street” as impulsive, unorganized, and reactive. Far from being monolithic phenomena, or sudden impulsive mobilizations, the inner dynamics of these successful revolutions were complex and distinct. In both cases, collective mobilizations were heavily influenced by shifts in the prevailing political structures, earlier uprisings by social actors, divisions among the elites, growing relative deprivation, and finally unemployment among middle class youths.

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Notes

[1]. Egypt enacted semi-privatization of its pension schemes in July of 2010 but the new legislation was expected to affect only new entrants to the labor market starting from January 2012.

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