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978-1-009-21985-3 — Power in Movement
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Introduction

The decade that began in 2010 initiated what was perhaps the most varied and rapidly spreading repertoire of conflict in living memory. Few governments fell, and almost no revolution succeeded but diffused through the new affordances of social media, social movements, and other forms of contention spread rapidly and millions of citizens became involved in them. I have chosen two "critical junctures"[1] – one at the beginning of the decade and the other at its end – to illustrate these trends. The first one erupted in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in 2010–11, while the second swept across in the United States in the summer of 2020; the first was an almost revolution, and the other was a cycle of protest that influenced an election and much else besides. Between them they will introduce us to the forms, the preconditions, and the outcomes of the sequences of contentious politics and social movements that we will encounter in this book.

TWO CRITICAL JUNCTURES[2]

At the start of the decade, the MENA seemed to be in the grip of authoritarian regimes. True, youth unemployment had increased – always a sign of distress in the region. Strikes and protests had broken out (Bishara 2014), but this was common in Egypt (Beinen and Vairel 2013). Most of the countries in the region were governed by monarchies or by aging dictators. Only with hindsight can we say that the region was in the grip of what Charles Tilly called "a revolutionary situation," as I will argue in Chapter 10 (El-Ghobashy 2021; Tilly 1993).

I am grateful to Robert Braun for his incisive comments on a draft of this chapter, which helped me to both shorten and tighten it up.

[1] On "critical junctures," see Collier and Munck (2017 and 2022).

[2] I am grateful to Mona El-Ghobashy, Neil Ketchley, and Wendy Pearlman for their helpful corrections to a draft of this section.

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But the MENA was not a unified region. In the West, Tunisia and Morocco had less than absolutist governments. In the East, Iran was ruled by a theocratic elite and Syria was in the hands of a family dictator, Bashar Al Assad, who had inherited his presidency from his father and who ruled the country with an equally iron fist. In the Gulf, oil-rich sheikdoms had evolved into varieties of absolutism: in the center of the region, Libya was ruled by an unhinged former military officer, Muammar Gaddafi; Egypt was in the grip of Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled his country for three decades with a combination of repression and welfare; and in Jordan, the King ruled alongside an elected parliament.

When the explosion came, it began in Tunisia, where a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, had immolated himself in frustration at the corruption of the regime when he was slapped by a policeman and his cart was confiscated (Hmed 2012; see Chapter 9 of this book). His gesture rapidly triggered a national protest movement that forced President Ben Ali to flee and began a halting progress toward parliamentary democracy.

Perhaps because this opening salvo made it seem as if progress to reform would be easy, what came to be called "The Arab Spring" spread like wildfire. Throughout the region, workers laid down their tools, classrooms emptied into the streets, police stations were burned, and governments tottered. While unorganized youth gained the international spotlight, a variety of social, professional, and religious organized groups soon joined the movements for change (El-Ghobashy 2021: 15–16). Map I.1 illustrates the diffusion of the protest wave over the first three months after the self-immolation of Bouazizi in Tunisia.

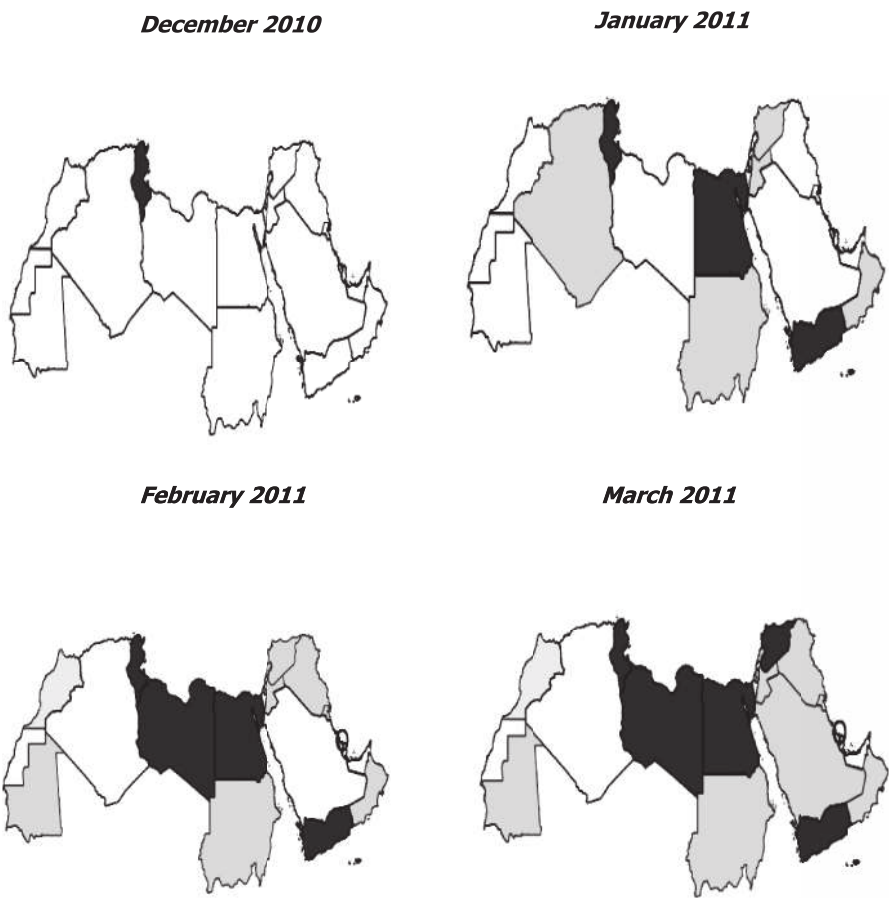
By the end of the winter of 2011, the entire region was caught up in a paroxysm of revolt, inspired by slogans like "*Ash-sha'b yurīd isqāṭ an-niẓām*" ("The people want to bring down the regime!"), and spread by social media. The revolts led neighboring states like Israel and distant benefactors like the United States to worry about the stability of the region. Even President Barack Obama – who had famously come to Egypt soon after his inauguration to call for liberalization – worried that historical allies might fall into the hands of Islamist fanatics like those who had attacked his country on September 11, 2001. By the beginning of February, Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Rodham Clinton, was urging Mubarak to institute reforms.[3]

The conflagration began with an apparently local incident – the self-immolation of Bouazizi – and led remarkably swiftly to the fall of Ben Ali. In the heady weeks that followed, as Mubarak was forced from power and a broad coalition came together on the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities (El-Ghobashy 2021; Ketchley 2017; Lynch 2013), it looked as if the most powerful country in the region would follow Tunisia's lead. Indeed, under the sponsorship of the SCAF (The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces),

[3] www.theguardian.com/world/2012/oct/21/barack-obama-arab-spring-cairo-speech.

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More Information



MAP 1.1 Map of the major Arab Spring protests, December 2010–March 2011
Source: These maps were kindly constructed by Neil Ketchley

reasonably fair elections were held and a government led by the Moslem Brotherhood took power (Ketchley 2017: ch. 4).

As Egypt seemed to be moving toward democracy, other revolutionary sparks were quickly smothered. In the Gulf, there were no street protests in Saudi Arabia, UAE, and Qatar and the movement in Bahrain was quickly snuffed out. In Libya, where the revolt was supported by an UN-backed intervention, Gaddafi was killed by insurgents and the country fragmented into competing armed militias. In Yemen, where dictator Abdullah Saleh resigned in a negotiated transition, a civil war broke out that continues till today. In the most tragic case – Syria – the Assad regime cracked down ruthlessly on dissenters, bombing and attacking entire neighborhoods and cities, in a violent civil war that killed over 500,000 Syrians and displaced

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More Information

more than half the population, seven million of whom became external exiles (Mazur 2021; Pearlman 2018).[4] Even in Jordan, where the King could not even be criticized in public, local and regional protests escalated into a national uprising (Schwedler 2022: ch. 6).

A decade later, with the exception of Tunisia, most of the countries of the region were worse off than they had been before the outbreak of the revolts. In Egypt, which many observers had seen as a beacon for the rest of the region, widespread discontent with the Muslim Brotherhood government elected in 2012 led millions, supported by the army, to demand its removal. By 2013, the elected President Mohammed Morsi was under arrest.

The decade that ended in 2020 was less "revolutionary" than what had happened in 2011, but was just as contentious. In Myanmar (formerly Burma), a military coup that had thrown out a fairly elected government was contested by a youthful resistance movement, one that later hooked up with regional ethnic groups in what threatened to become a civil war.[5] In the West, a series of anti-lockdown protests contested governments' policies in combating the coronavirus pandemic while, in Brazil, protests broke out against the government's failure to contain the pandemic. But it was in the United States that 2020 produced the largest multiracial protest cycle in the nation's history.

The year 2020 was a terrible one for the nation's African-American community. Apart from the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus pandemic on people of color,[6] the brutal murder of a Black man by a white policeman on the streets of Minneapolis exposed the abiding racial cleavage in American society. Not long before, another African American named Ahmaud Arbery had been shot dead by two white men who pursued him in a van while he jogged through their neighborhood.[7] Not long after that, a young woman named Breonna Taylor was killed in her bedroom in Louisville, Kentucky by three police officers executing a "no-knock" warrant looking for drug dealers.[8]

But the culmination of this string of killings came on May 25, when George Floyd was arrested outside a store in Minneapolis, where he had been suspected of trying to pass off counterfeit money.[9] Caught on a cellphone camera with his

[4] The shattering figures on military and civilian deaths in the Syrian civil war can be found at www.statista.com/chart/19581/syrian-civil-war-fatalities-documented-by-syrian-observatory-for-human-rights/. Refugee totals by country of destination will be found at www.cfr.org/article/arab-spring-ten-years-whats-legacy-uprisings.

[5] www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html.

[6] For evidence of the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on minorities, go to https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33231496/.

[7] The murder was filmed by a third man who was later found to have been collaborating with the killers. www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/05/10/ahmaud-arbery-shooting-new-video-shows-georgia-jogger-did-nothing-illegal/3105123001/.

[8] www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/breonna-taylor-police-shooting-what-we-know-about-kentucky-woman-n1207841.

[9] www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52861726.

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Excerpt
More Information

hands manacled, Floyd appeared to be complying with the arresting officers. But moments later, he was brought to the ground next to a police cruiser. When he complained that he couldn't breathe, the policeman, Derek Chauvin, told him to stop shouting. As passersby pleaded with Chauvin to release him, Floyd cried out for his mother before he died.

A video taken by a young bystander revealed the extent of the crime. Chauvin had kept his knee on Floyd's neck for almost nine minutes while three of his colleagues looked on. The officer was charged with third-degree murder, while the other officers were charged with lesser offenses. Chauvin was condemned by a judge the following May and was sentenced to 22.5 years in prison a month later.[10]

Floyd's murder led to a massive cycle of protest across the country that spread across the world. Less than two weeks after the killing, NBC News identified George Floyd protests in forty countries on every continent but Antarctica.[11] These protests were particularly vigorous in countries like the United Kingdom, which had substantial populations of color.[12]

But the most meaningful reactions to the murder of George Floyd came in the run-up to the US presidential election campaign. Polls taken over the weeks following his killing estimated that between 15 and 26 million Americans participated in demonstrations over the killing. According to the *New York Times*, on June 6 alone, half a million people came out to protest in nearly 550 different places.[13] "I've never seen self-reports of protest participation that high for a specific issue over such a short period," said Neal Caren, editor of the prestigious academic journal, *Mobilization* – more than the 3–5 million people who had turned out to protest against Donald Trump's inauguration four years earlier.[14]

Protests following police abuse had also occurred during the urban unrest of the 1960s. But in three respects, this new wave of protest was different:

First, the slogan of many of the protesters was institutional – the demand to "defund the police!"[15]

Second, in part because the 2020 presidential election was imminent, the protests transitioned quickly into institutional politics.

Third, and most important, outrage at Floyd's murder spread from African Americans to White and Hispanic communities and to small towns and cities around

[10] www.nytimes.com/2020/05/29/us/derek-chauvin-criminal-complaint.html.
[11] www.nbcnews.com/news/world/map-george-floyd-protests-countries-worldwide-n1228391.
[12] www.bbc.com/news/uk-52907101. [13] Buchanan et al. 2020.
[14] See Chenoweth and Pressman 2017.
[15] In a dozen cities, including Minneapolis, city councils voted reductions in police funding. These included some of America's biggest cities, including New York, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and San Francisco. The defunding bills included proposals to remove police as responders for "non-criminal" calls, homeless services, traffic enforcement, mental health emergencies, substance abuse, public transit, and other areas of social services. www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/aug/15/defund-police-movement-us-victories-what-next?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other.

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More Information

the country as well as to metropolitan areas. This was "a demographic mix that is far more varied than anything we have seen in recent years," wrote sociologist and civil rights expert Doug McAdam soon after.[16]

But as it has often been the case in American history, when African Americans make progress, a countermovement against the movement soon arises. On July 8, 2020, accompanied by his Attorney General, William Barr, President Donald Trump marched out of the White House to St. John's Episcopal Church, which had been damaged by fire in a previous protest, brandishing a Bible. Because there were still protesters on the streets, the president ordered security forces to clear the square in front of the White House, employing tear gas to do so. Trump's photo-op in front of the church came after he delivered remarks at the White House in which he declared himself "your president of law and order" and demanded that state governors deploy National Guard units to "dominate the streets."[17]

The governors were unwilling to respond to Trump's demand, but, affronted by the protests, by street paintings of "Black Lives Matter," and later by the pandemic lockdowns decreed by Democratic governors, groups of far-right activists attacked demonstrators all over the country in remarkably similar routines. In the course of the campaign, convoys of vehicles filled with armed rightwing activists began to thread through the streets of cities where there had been racial justice protests, waving their guns and occasionally shooting paintballs at protesters.[18]

As in many cycles of contention, the attention of the public focused on evidence that the country was going through a crisis. And so it was, heightened by the tragedy of the coronavirus pandemic, by the economy's attendant decline, and by the outgoing president's claim that he had been robbed of the presidency by an electoral steal. But beneath the radar, there were signs that the chaos and conflict of the summer and fall of 2020 were disguising quieter shifts that might lead to a galactic shift in American politics. This had been hinted at during the midterm elections of 2018, when the Democrats made major gains (Meyer and Tarrow 2018). But it culminated in Trump's defeat in the 2020 elections, when Democratic candidate Joe Biden beat the incumbent president by over seven million votes. Inspired by the George Floyd movement, young people turned out to vote in greater numbers than in 2016. But the biggest demographic story was the massive turnout of

[16] McAdam 2020.

[17] www.npr.org/2020/07/17/892277592/federal-officers-use-unmarked-vehicles-to-grab-protesters-in-portland.

[18] In many of these places, far-right activists adopted the tactic of ramming protesters with their vehicles. As of early July, over 100 Black Lives Matter protesters reported having been rammed while marching. www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/07/08/vehicle-ramming-attacks-66-us-since-may-27/5397700002/.

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More Information

Black voters – and particularly of African-American women – to support the Democrats. George Floyd's murder was the incident that helped end the experiment in elective authoritarianism that had threatened to undermine American democracy since Trump's election in 2016, but it was only a spark in a longer and more deeply rooted critical juncture.

That juncture did not ease with the end of the election season. Like an increasing number of elected dictators in the Global South, in the wake of his election loss, the outgoing president insisted the election had been stolen from him and launched a series of legal and media challenges against the outcome. In state after state, Trump-employed lawyers fruitlessly challenged the official results and Trump supporters threatened election officials.[19] The campaign moved beyond the courts to attempts to convince public opinion that the election had been stolen. In February 2021, the Atlantic Council sponsored a search using a social media monitoring tool that detected over 8,200 online news articles containing keywords "Stop the Steal" or "#StopTheSteal" between September 1, 2020 and February 2, 2021. Those articles garnered more than 70,000,000 engagements on different platforms. The results of the social media search are reproduced in Figure I.1 from a *Just Security* report on February 12, 2021.

The results of this priming of his base from the outgoing president were not long in coming. On January 6, 2021, an invasion of the Capitol by groups of Trump supporters underscored both the danger to democracy and the revulsion of the majority of Americans – including most Republicans.[20] From a police murder to a mass protest movement to a countermovement, to a presidential election and an attempted insurrection, America in 2020–21 experienced the biggest domestic crisis since the outbreak of the Civil War over a century earlier. Like the Arab Spring, these events combined a cycle of social movements and contentious politics. Before turning to how this book will proceed, let us first define and characterize these terms.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

Ordinary people do not often try to exert power by contentious means against national states or opponents. But in the last seventy years alone, the American Civil Rights movement, the peace, environmental and feminist movements, revolts against authoritarianism in both Europe and the Third World, and the rise of Islamist movements have brought masses of people into the streets demanding change. They often succeeded, but even when

[19] The most notorious threats came against Georgia's Republican Secretary of State, Brad Raffensberger, after he certified the results from Trump himself and from supporters who threatened Raffensberger's family. www.cbs46.com/news/report-ga-sec-of-state-raffenspergers-family-receiving-death-threats-over-2020-election/article_48ac0104-cabc-11eb-9618-6f559ef997f9.html.

[20] See Rachel Blum and Christopher Parker (2022).

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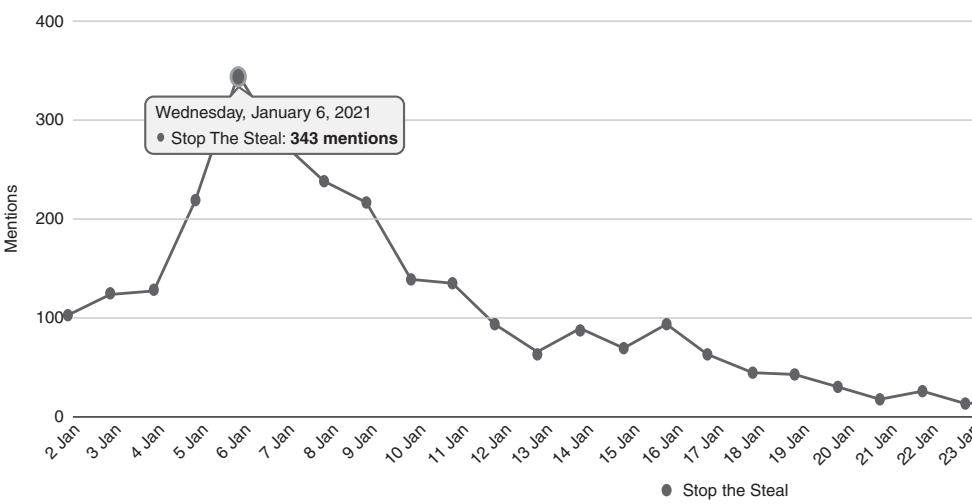


FIGURE 1.1 Web mentions of the "stop the steal" message, September 2020–February 2021
Source: Reproduced with the kind permission of the Atlantic Council's Digital Forensic Res
stopthesteal-timeline-of-social-media-and-extremist-activities-leading-to-1-6-insurrection/

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More Information

they failed, their actions set in motion important political, cultural, and international changes.

Contentious politics occurs when ordinary people – often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood – join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents. Such confrontations go back to the dawn of history. But mounting, coordinating, and sustaining them against powerful opponents is the unique contribution of the social movement – an invention of the modern age and an accompaniment of the rise of the modern state (see Chapter 1). Social movements are triggered when changing political opportunities and constraints create incentives to take action for actors who lack resources of their own. People contend through known repertoires of contention and expand them by creating innovations at their margins. When they are backed by well-structured social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols, contentious politics leads to sustained interaction with opponents.

How ordinary people take advantage of incentives created by shifting opportunities and constraints; how they combine conventional and challenging repertoires of action; how they transform social networks and cultural frameworks into collective action – and with what outcomes; how these and other factors combine in major cycles of protest and sometimes in revolutions; how the internet and other forms of electronic communication are changing the nature of mobilization; and how the social movement is challenging democracy in the twenty-first century: these are the main themes of this book.

These themes take on special importance given the vast spread and growing diversity of contentious politics today. Just think of the variety of social movements since the 1960s: first civil rights and the student movement; ecology, feminism, and the peace movements; struggles for human rights in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian systems, and Islamic and Jewish religious extremism in the Middle East and Hindu militancy in India; anti-immigrant violence in Western Europe and Christian fundamentalism in the United States, ethnic nationalism in the Balkans and the former Soviet Union; suicide bombings in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan. Over the past five decades, a wave of new forms of contention has spread from one region of the world to another and among different social and political actors.

Not all these events warrant the term "*social movement*," a term I will reserve for *sequences of collective action based on underlying social networks, on resonant collective action frames, and on the capacity to sustain challenges against powerful opponents* (see Chapter 1). But all are a part of the broader universe of contentious politics, which emerges, on the one hand, from within institutional politics, and, on the other, draws on both structural roots and political opportunities. Placing the social movement and its particular dynamics within this universe of contentious politics is a central goal of this study.

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In this book, I will not attempt to write a history of either movements or the broader field of contentious politics. Nor will I press a particular theoretical perspective on my readers or attack others. Instead, I will offer a broad theoretical framework buttressed by historical and empirical materials for understanding the place of social movements, cycles of contention, and revolutions within the more general category of contentious politics. This book takes up this challenge.

Contentious Collective Action

The irreducible act that lies at the base of all social movements, protests, rebellions, riots, strike waves, and revolutions is *contentious collective action*.

Collective action can take many forms – brief or sustained, institutionalized or disruptive, humdrum or dramatic. Most of it occurs routinely within institutions, on the part of constituted groups acting in the name of goals that would hardly raise an eyebrow. Collective action becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to representative institutions, who act in the name of new or unaccepted claims, and who behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others or authorities.

Contentious collective action is the basis of social movements, not because movements are always violent or extreme, but because it is the main and often the only recourse that most ordinary people possess against better-equipped opponents or powerful states. This does not mean that movements do nothing else but contend: they build organizations, elaborate ideologies, socialize and mobilize constituencies, and their members engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities. Moreover, some movements are largely apolitical, and focus on their internal lives or those of their members. But even such movements, as sociologist Craig Calhoun reminds us, encounter authorities in conflictual ways because it is these authorities who are responsible for law and order and for setting the norms for society (1994b: 21). Organizers exploit political opportunities, respond to threats, create collective identities, and bring people together in order to mobilize them against more powerful opponents.

Contentious forms of collective action are different than market relations, lobbying, or representative politics because they bring ordinary people into confrontation with opponents, elites, or authorities. This means that the particular historical, cultural, and power conditions of their society in part determine and in part are determined by contentious politics. Much of the history of movement/state interaction can be read as a duet of strategy and counterstrategy between movement activists and powerholders. Ordinary people have power because they challenge powerholders, produce solidarities, and draw on meanings with significance to particular population groups, situations, and national cultures.

This means that we will have to embed the general formulations of collective action theory within history with the insights of sociology, political science, and

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