

## I

## Introduction

## Five Snapshots of Contention

- **25 January 2011.** Police in the Suez open fire on anti-Mubarak protestors as they leave Midan al-Isaaf and head for the governorate building. By the early evening, several protestors have been killed in violent clashes with security forces. The next day, local residents and the relatives of the martyrs hold a demonstration outside of the Arbayeen district police station in the Suez. As the crowd swells to several hundred, police officers fire tear gas and birdshot in an attempt to disperse the demonstrators. Young men respond by letting off fireworks and throwing Molotov cocktails. By nightfall, the police station is on fire.
- **2 February 2011.** A column of pro-Mubarak *baltigiyya* (approximately, thugs) approaches the Talaat Harb entrance to Midan al-Tahrir in downtown Cairo. An army officer confronts the thugs. Brandishing his pistol, he fires repeatedly in the air. When the thugs retreat, anti-Mubarak protestors rush to embrace the officer, chanting, “The army and the people are one hand.” Weeks later, large posters and banners depicting the scene are erected outside military bases and army checkpoints across the country.
- **22 November 2011.** Protestors throw stones at a phalanx of soldiers, police, and Central Security Force (CSF) units stationed on Muhammad Mahmoud Street, a road leading from Midan al-Tahrir to the Interior Ministry. Security forces respond with volleys of tear gas and birdshot, while young men on motorcycles ferry wounded protestors to improvised field hospitals. Secular activists in the Midan

confront a senior Muslim Brother, whom they denounce for selling out the Revolution for electoral gain. Fearing for his safety, the Muslim Brother withdraws from Tahrir.

- **30 June 2013.** Uniformed police officers lead a protest march from outside of the Police Officers' Club in Giza to Midan al-Tahrir, calling on the military to remove Islamist president Muhammad Mursi. The crowd of ostensibly civilian protestors wave Egyptian flags and chant, "The police and the people are one hand." As large crowds continue to take to Tahrir, a retired Egyptian army general is interviewed on CNN, where he proclaims that 33 million Egyptians have taken to the streets to call for new presidential elections.
- **14 August 2013.** Egyptian army bulldozers and heavily armed police take up positions around a Muslim Brother protest occupation in Midan Raba'a al-Adawiyya, a public square in Eastern Cairo. In the hours that follow, police and military personnel launch a sustained assault on the forty-seven-day-old occupation, killing over 900 protestors in what Human Rights Watch (2013) describe as "the most serious incident of mass unlawful killings in modern Egyptian history."

These vignettes of collective violence, mass mobilization, and repression are taken from the key moments and episodes of contentious street politics witnessed in Egypt since 2011. When read together, these snapshots encapsulate the empirical focus and explanatory task of this book: how an authoritarian regime came under sustained attack from below only to violently resurrect itself, and what this process can teach us about the prospects and legacies of contentious politics in the Middle East and North Africa after the Arab Spring.

This restoration was not inevitable. When Husni Mubarak resigned on 11 February 2011, following eighteen days of unruly and boisterous mass protests in the streets and squares of Egypt's cities, many believed that a definitive rupture had occurred. Over subsequent months and years, however, a parlous and deeply flawed democratic transition, unfolding under the direction of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), revealed a new set of problems and ambiguities for Egypt's self-styled "revolutionaries." With military powers and old regime prerogatives still intact, the rapidly convened coalition of forces that had come together in Midan al-Tahrir and elsewhere divided, as narrow partisanship trumped coalition building.

The eventual triumph of the Muslim Brothers' candidate Muhammad Mursi in the second round of presidential elections held in June 2012

*Introduction*

3

seemed to presage a new institutional rubric in which the state apparatus would, at the very least, be brought under democratic control, but instead revived abiding anxieties and uncertainties about Islamist takeover and dictatorial intent. Two years after Mubarak's removal, a second round of mass protests, this time against Mursi's presidency, paved the way for a military coup that took place on 3 July 2013, precipitating an ongoing process of elite reconstitution that has since seen Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, a field marshal and former defense minister, installed as president in an elliptical return to Mubarak-style authoritarianism.

After a prolonged absence, the police fully redeployed to the streets of Egypt's cities, better armed and more numerous than before, charged with enforcing a new protest law that criminalizes opposition to the military-backed government. In the year following the 2013 coup, security forces killed over 3,000 protestors, while tens of thousands of regime opponents were detained. The arm of Egyptian State Security tasked with monitoring Egypt's Islamist movements and political dissidents, which was nominally disbanded following the 25th January Revolution, was formally reconstituted. A reinvigorated elite-level politics has not produced a model of governance responsive to protestors' original demands for “*a'ish*, *hurriyya*, *'adāla igtimā'iyya*” (bread, freedom, social justice). Meanwhile, human dignity (*karāma insāniyya*), which sometimes replaces social justice as the third demand, continues to be routinely violated through the state's use of torture and calibrated sexual violence against its opponents.

Against this backdrop of disappointments, reversals and retrenchments, the trajectories and legacies of the 25th January Revolution present important and interrelated puzzles for political sociologists and observers of the 2011 Arab Spring alike. How did Egyptians overthrow a seemingly well-fortified dictator of three decades in less than three weeks? How can we account for the position of the military during the eighteen days of mass mobilization? What explains the derailing of democratic transition in post-Mubarak Egypt? Why did the 25th January revolutionary coalition split? How did old regime forces engineer a return to authoritarian rule? How has repression shaped the possibilities for contentious collective action in post-coup Egypt? From a series of vantage points and seeking processual, agent-centered, and bottom-up explanations, this book shows that these puzzles, and the broader patterns of political change in post-Mubarak Egypt, can only be understood by paying close attention to the evolving dynamics of contentious politics witnessed in Egypt since 2011.

## EGYPT IN A TIME OF REVOLUTION

Was the 25th January Revolution a revolution? The answer to this question has important analytical implications for how we account for the events of January–February 2011 and what followed. On the one hand, a significant number of Egyptians certainly referred to it as such. My informants frequently prefaced their recollection of events with “*fi ayām al-thawra...*” (in the days of the revolution) or “*fi wa’t al-thawra...*” (in the time of the revolution). Those who had joined the protests in Midan al-Tahrir and elsewhere were “*thuwār*” (revolutionaries).<sup>1</sup> Non-participants were members of “*hizb al-kanaba*” (the party of the sofa), while the revolution’s opponents were “*al-nizām*” (the regime), and later “*al-filūl*” (literally, the remnants [of the regime]). Protestors killed during the mobilization were “*shuhadā’ thawrat khamisa wa ‘ishrīn yanāyir*” (martyrs of the 25th January Revolution). This “revolutionary idiom” (Sewell 1979), replete with a chorus of jokes, put-downs, and internet memes, infiltrated newspaper coverage, television chat shows, and even the press releases issued by the SCAF in the year following Mubarak’s departure. Such a process of naming and narration was undeniably significant, not only in constituting the lived experiences of anti-Mubarak protestors (El Chazli 2015), but also in legitimizing and authenticating protestors’ demands and expectations in light of the country’s revolutionary heritage (Sabaseviciute 2011; Cole 2014; see also Selbin 2010).

On the other hand, it seems much harder to justify an analytical categorization of “revolution” when reflecting on the trajectory of post-Mubarak politics, even given that the scholarly definition of what constitutes a revolution has expanded considerably in the past few decades. A new literature on contemporary revolutions argues that the revolutions of the late twentieth century onwards differ in several important ways from those that preceded them. If the classic model of a “social revolution” (Skocpol 1979) involved protracted and frequently violent mobilizations to transform the social and economic order of semi-agrarian societies, today’s “revolutions” are found to be “negotiated” (Lawson 2005), “electoral” (Bunce and Wolchik 2006), “non-violent” (Nepstad 2011), “unarmed” (Ritter 2014), and at least nominally, “democratic” (Thompson 2003)<sup>2</sup> in their ethos. Contemporary revolutions are more

<sup>1</sup> Later, to be a “revolutionary” narrowed considerably and came to be marked by a double rejection of the old regime and the Muslim Brothers.

<sup>2</sup> For a careful and thoughtful critique of “democratic revolutions,” see Beissinger (2013).

urban and compact, lasting only weeks or months (Beissinger 2013; 2014), while the new measure of revolutionary “success” is increasingly the ousting of an incumbent authoritarian leader (Nepstad 2011: xiv). According to this definition, revolutions are, therefore, more a “mode of regime change” (Beissinger 2014), than a project of radical – political, social or economic – transformation (see Goldstone 1991; Goodwin 2001). As such, revolutions are increasingly seen as pathways to political liberalization, which strengthen rather than challenge the liberal international order (Lawson 2012: 12).

Scholars working in this vein have been quick to adopt the 25th January Revolution as evidence of this new modality of revolutionary action (Nepstad 2011: xv; Beissinger 2013: 574, 2014; Lawson 2015; Ritter 2014). But despite several tentative parallels that can be drawn with the 25th January repertoire of contention, political developments in Egypt in the three years and more since Mubarak’s demise suggest that this designation was premature. Under the SCAF’s guardianship, the Mubarak-era state was never upended, and it remains resolutely intact today. Nor, as I will go on to show, did the 2011–2012 parliamentary and 2012 presidential elections in Egypt result in civilians exercising meaningful democratic control over the state. Given all this, it seems clear that no democratic or political revolution, even in the expanded analytical sense, can be said to have occurred.

So, what do I mean by the 25th January Revolution? According to my analysis, the eighteen days of the 25th January Revolution are better captured by the concept of a “revolutionary situation” (Tilly 1978: ch.7, 2006: ch.7; El-Ghobashy 2011) in which an alternative claim to sovereignty in the name of “the people” (*al-sha‘b*) formed the basis of a truly countrywide mobilization against the regime of Husni Mubarak. By revolutionary situation, I mean a conjunctural episode involving: “1) contenders or coalitions of contenders advancing exclusive competing claims to control of the state or some segment of it; 2) commitment to those claims by a significant segment of the citizenry; 3) incapacity or unwillingness of rulers to suppress the alternative coalition and/or commitment to its claims” (Tilly 2006: 159).<sup>3</sup> Egypt’s revolutionary situation was brought about by anti-police violence, mass mobilization in the country’s squares and main roads, and fraternization with the military – but it was never properly established and quickly subsided into

<sup>3</sup> For a useful discussion on the sociology of revolutionary situations, see Bennani-Chraïbi and Fillieule (2015).

a conventional democratic transition on 11 February 2011, following which constitutional and electoral forums came to structure a formal political process that unfolded under the direction of the military.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the initial revolutionary situation in Egypt being quickly averted, revolutionary expectations and the new dynamics of contentious politics arising from the eighteen days of mass protest continued to structure, shape, and energize political life. In what was for many a “time of revolution,” Egyptians continued to mobilize. Figure 1.1 shows the frequency and size of contentious events in 2011. A massive strike wave by organized (and unorganized) labor, which began in the final days of the 25th January Revolution, was accompanied by local residents mobilizing across the governorates in a bid to achieve redress for their longstanding grievances (see Barrie and Ketchley 2016). There were even several episodes when the country appeared poised to return to a revolutionary situation: for instance, during the events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street in late November 2011, when protestors tried, unsuccessfully, to recreate the conditions of early 2011 and replace the SCAF with a civilian-led government.

These revolutionary aspirations were efficiently harnessed and redeployed on 30 June 2013, when both secular activists and old regime forces took to the streets in opposition to the divisive presidency of Muhammad Mursi. Egypt’s democratic transition failed three days later, on 3 July 2013, following the military coup. In the subsequent period, the revolutionary idiom of 2011 was superseded by a discourse of *haybat al-dawla* (awe of the state), employed to justify several regime-orchestrated massacres of pro-Mursi supporters, the detention of many

<sup>4</sup> An alternative perspective argues that a “long-term revolutionary process” (Achcar 2013: 17; see also Abdelrahman 2014) is underway in Egypt that will continue so long as the underlying socio-economic grievances that gave rise to the Arab Spring remain undressed. Operating in a Marxian, historical materialist vein, the *longue durée* view cautions against prematurely calling time on whether the 25th January Revolution was or was not a revolution, deduced from short-term successes or failures. Unfortunately, it is difficult to see how this analysis survives the events of 3 July 2013 and the subsequent crackdown. Revolutions, as “second wave historical sociology” (Adams, Clemens, and Orloff 2005) has argued (Skocpol 1979; Goldstone 1991; Tilly 1993; Goodwin 2001; Foran 2005), do not simply flow from the objective contradictions of capitalism and class; rather, they unfold via particular pathways of state breakdown and require both coherent organizations capable of weathering sustained repression and innovative tactics to broker new alliances and mount effective challenges to the regime’s apparatus of coercion. For these reasons, revolutionary outcomes, Tilly (1978: ch. 7) reminds us, remain extraordinary and exceptional events, precisely because most revolutionary situations and revolutionary forces are defeated by incumbent powers.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-18497-8 — Egypt in a Time of Revolution  
Neil Ketchley  
Excerpt  
[More Information](#)

7

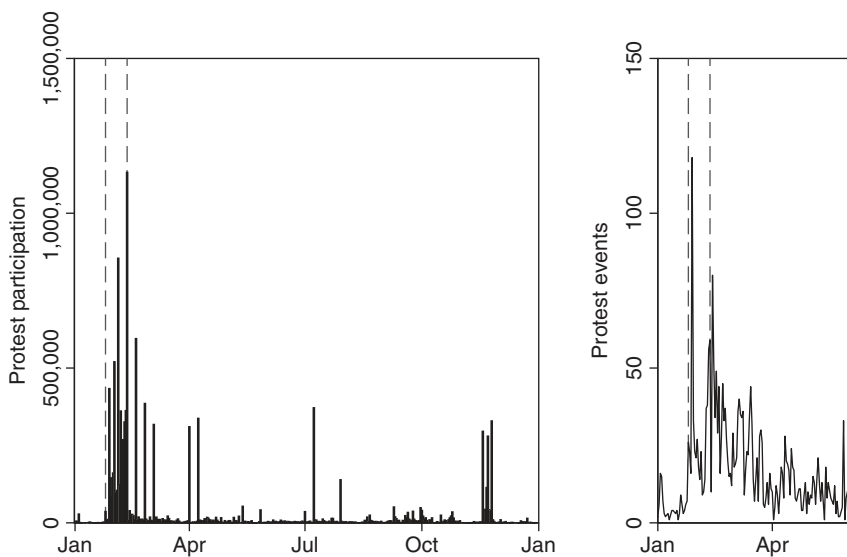


FIGURE 1.1 Protest participation and frequency, 2011–2012. Notes: The dashed lines mark the start and end of the Revolution.

of those who instigated the mobilization against Mubarak, and a new protest law. An anti-coup movement led by the Muslim Brothers launched daily street protests using a repertoire of contention evolving out of that employed in the 25th January Revolution. However, their efforts were quickly blunted by unprecedented repression, a fragmented political landscape (a consequence of the failed democratic transition), the anti-coup protestors' refusal to take up arms, the tendency of Egypt's poorest to equate protest with socioeconomic threat (Chalcraft 2014: 179), and international and regional support for the consolidation of the military-backed regime.

Against this backdrop, *thawrat khamisa wa 'ishrīn yanāyir* (the 25th of January Revolution) remains commonly accepted shorthand in Egypt for referring to the eighteen days of popular protest that began on 25 January and which ended with the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. It is in this sense that I use it.

#### CONTENTIOUS POLITICS

How can we place the 25th January Revolution, its trajectories and legacies within a broader scheme of social and political explanation? The heuristic adopted in this book is informed, most obviously, by the contentious politics literature associated with Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow, and Charles Tilly's (2001) *Dynamics of Contention* (DOC). That work sought to decompartmentalize the study of revolution, social movements, riots and other modes of transgressive collective action, and view them instead as belonging to a shared continuum of episodic, public and collective claim making. Under this common rubric, contentious politics is thus defined as "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants" (Ibid.: 5).

Viewed in this mode, the 25th January Revolution, the post-Mubarak democratic transition and the anti-coup mobilization do not represent distinct processes or phenomena but can be understood by analyzing who is making claims, how those claims are made, the objects of those claims and regime responses to claim making. As Sidney Tarrow usefully sets out:

Within this arena, movements intersect with each other and with institutional actors in a dynamic process of move, countermove, adjustment and negotiation.



That process includes claim making, responses to the actions of elites – repressive, facilitative or both – and the intervention of third parties, who often take advantage of the opportunities created by these conflicts to advance their own claims. *The outcomes of these intersections, in turn, are how a polity evolves.*

(2012: 3; my emphasis added)

According to this perspective, the diverse ways in which Egyptians banded together to challenge the status quo are not simply manifestations of grievances to be explained, but were, in themselves, constitutive of the post-Mubarak political process. In this, to echo Dan Slater (2010: 5), to make sense of the patterns of political change in Egypt and the trajectory of the Arab Spring more broadly, we must account for “what contentious politics can explain in its own right.”<sup>5</sup>

Here, my mode and manner of analysis is necessarily agentic and relational, treating “social interaction, social ties, communication and conversation not merely as expressions of structure, rationality, consciousness, or culture but as active sites of creation and change” (McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly 2001: 22). As Tilly (2003: 5–8) notes, the conventional explanatory strategy pursued by social scientists has been to privilege either the *ideas* of participants, or their *behavior*. In contrast, “Relation people make transactions among persons and groups far more central than do idea and behavior people. They argue that humans develop their personalities and practices through interchanges with other humans, and that the interchanges themselves always involve a degree of negotiation and creativity” (Ibid.: 5–6).<sup>6</sup> In the empirical chapters that follow, I use this insight to develop a conjunctural and interactive account of the 25th January Revolution and the post-Mubarak political process, grounding my explanation in a series of relationships: between collective violence and nonviolent activism, protestors and security forces, elections and contentious collective action, elites and street protest movements, and repression and mass mobilization. In doing so, I show how a relational ontology can be employed to interrogate several key assumptions of the literature on civil resistance, emotions, democratization, authoritarian retrenchment, and repression.

Before then, a digression on one of the key analytical concepts that structures this book and its argument is germane. In the argot of the contentious politics literature, the ways in which Egyptians make claims is

<sup>5</sup> For two accounts of the formative history of contentious politics in making the MENA region, see Barrie (2016) and Chalcraft (2016).

<sup>6</sup> For the classic statement on relational sociology, see Emirbayer (1997).

constrained by the available “repertoire of contention.” Tilly (1977) first introduced the “repertoire” metaphor to describe the evolving subset of protest tactics used in France between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries. This drew on one of his earliest and arguably most productive insights (1978: ch.6): that when people act collectively, they only do so in a limited number of ways. Expanding upon this in later works, Tilly argued that:

Repertoires are learned cultural creations, but they do not descend from abstract philosophy or take shape as a result of political propaganda; they emerge from struggle. People learn to break windows in protest, attack pilloried prisoners, tear down dishonored houses, stage public marches, petition, hold formal meetings, organize special-interest associations. At any point in history, however, they learn only a rather small number of alternative ways to act collectively. The limits of that learning, plus the fact that potential collaborators and antagonists likewise have learned a relatively limited set of means, constrain the choices available for collective interaction. (1995: 41–42)

Michael Biggs (2013: 408–409) has reformulated Tilly’s stance into two interrelated propositions: “repetition is far more likely than adoption; adoption is far more likely than invention.” In Egypt, in the period between 2011 and 2014, the repertoire of contention was highly repetitive. This is well captured in Figure 1.2, which classifies protest events by their tactics during the eighteen days of the 25th January Revolution, the events of Muhammad Mahmoud Street, the 30 June protests, and the anti-coup mobilization. Four tactics – occupations, sit-ins, demonstrations, and marches – predominated, and were used in over 75 percent of protest events in each episode.

Just as the dynamics of mobilization in Egypt were constrained by the available modalities of claim making, they were also delimited by the spaces and ecologies of protest (see Sewell 2001; Tilly 2000). During the first days of the 25th January Revolution, a powerful and easily replicable model for mobilization emerged in Cairo that then diffused throughout Egypt and then other Arab Spring countries: protestors left designated mosques following prayer to join up with other protestors in public squares and main arterial roads. Mubarak’s ousting on 11 February 2011 underlined the efficacy (and legitimacy) of this model, leading to its emulation by a multitude of other political actors in the years that followed, including old regime holdovers, Islamists, local residents, and workers in Egypt and beyond (e.g., Ketchley 2013; 2016). With time, security forces adapted to protestors’ tactics and their use of space by targeting key nodes in the spaces of contention. How protestors responded to these countermeasures, and