

# 1 INTRODUCTION

This is a book about revolutions, whose study is as old as despotic political rule. How states fall, how rebels mobilize into insurgents and fight, how leaders organize their rule and put down rebellions – all have long been studied and analyzed by generations of scholars. This book travels down some well-trodden paths. Many of the topics the book discusses have been covered by well-known political scientists and sociologists for some time. My goal here is not to challenge our assumptions about why revolutions come about or why they are waged. Rather, I present here a framework for placing revolutions into broadly different categories based on their causes and processes. The book's originality, I believe, lies in its classification of revolutions into three ideal types. These ideal types are *planned*, *spontaneous*, and *negotiated* revolutions.

Before examining each of these categories in some detail, it is important to present a definition of revolution. Zoltan Barany offers a useful, minimalist definition of revolution, “simply as a *bottom-up mass popular challenge to the established political regime and/or its ruler(s)*.”<sup>1</sup> Along similar lines, I see revolutions as entailing fundamental changes to three key aspects of politics: changes to the state, its leaders, its institutions, and their functions; changes to the nature and quality of state-society relations and the ways the two interact; and changes to the prevailing political culture, in the overall ways in which society conceives of politics, political institutions and leaders, and political principles.

By and large, revolutions are mass-based affairs of great magnitude, brought on and carried forward through the mobilization of

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masses of people in order to achieve specific political goals. Frequently, though not always, they are accompanied by tremendous violence, either in the lead-up to the capture of power or once power is captured, or, as is often the case, both before and after state power changes hands. Contrary to popular assumption, however, revolutions do not always necessarily come through or are followed by considerable violence. The late 1980s, for example, bore witness to the eruption of revolutions in Eastern Europe that entailed comparatively little violence.

In the lexicon of political rule, few words appear to have been abused by politicians and political aspirants more than *revolution*. Few politicians, in fact, and even fewer political contenders do not consider their mandate or their exercise of power to be revolutionary. In reality, however, revolutions are rather rare historical occurrences. They turn the world of politics upside down, change the basic premises on which political culture is based, and transform the principles according to which political conduct is governed. In this respect, revolutions are distinctively political episodes, although their precise occurrence is brought on by a coalescence of not only political but also social and cultural factors.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the frequent abuse of the word, actual revolutions are a historical rarity. There are several reasons for this. As we shall see shortly, all revolutions require the simultaneous appearance of at least three developments: the weakness and vulnerability of state institutions; the appearance of mobilized groups who could take advantage of these state vulnerabilities; and a receptive mass of people who are willing to be mobilized for the purpose of overthrowing the present rulers. But on their own, each of these conditions is unlikely to emerge, and their concurrent appearance is even rarer.

To start, dictators seldom give up power without a fight, and all too often in fact they are careful not to create conditions that make political opposition possible. Seldom do dictators rule by the stick only. More often than not, they collect around themselves elites and oligarchs who become deeply vested in the status quo by occupying strategic positions in the state machinery and in the economy's commanding heights. More importantly, dictators devise a variety of means to maintain a praetorian guard and to keep a vigilant eye on the armed forces. Even when the civilian institutions of the state lose much of their efficacy and cease largely to function properly, the security services tend to continue as usual and can effectively stifle dissent. Securing the support of powerful international patrons is equally significant.

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In addition to the state's continued ability to repress potential dissenters, there are difficulties inherent in mounting a coordinated uprising. In any rebellion, there are different levels of involvement, with some groups and individuals being the constituents (target community or social base), and others serving as sympathizers, actual members, activists, or militants. The rebels have a dilemma in that as far as potential participants in the cause are concerned, inaction is the most rational option: The costs of rebellion can be very high, or at best unknown, whereas the benefits of not participating in the rebellion, if it succeeds, are still the same. Thus "extensive collective dissent is improbable," and "most rebels do not actually rebel."<sup>3</sup> According to Mark Lichbach, "Active dissidents are a small minority in *all* types of collective dissent." He argues that there is overwhelming evidence that

the five percent rule holds for neighborhood organizations, community conflicts, urban rebellions, student revolts, trade unions, guerrilla wars, and rural populist movements. Rebels, moreover, are a small minority in *all* major instances of collective dissent. The rule holds for the American, Russian, Algerian, and Cuban revolutions, and several fascist movements.<sup>4</sup>

Rebels can mitigate the dilemma of low participation through several means, most notably increasing the benefits of participation and lowering the costs of doing so; increasing resources; improving the productivity of their tactics; increasing the probability of winning and making a difference; and restricting the exit of those who have joined.<sup>5</sup> None of these options, however, are necessarily easy and without some cost.

Despite the many difficulties that undermine the possibility of their occurrence, revolutions do on occasion take place. What I have set out to do in this book is to present an analysis of their causes, their consequences, and, just as importantly, the different categories to which they belong.

### The Central Argument

I argue here that of the three key ingredients that all revolutions require – i.e., state breakdown, revolutionary leaders, and mass mobilization – each appears in a different order depending on the broad category to which a revolution belongs. There are some revolutions that

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are largely *spontaneous*, as in the one in France in 1789, in Russia in February 1917, in Iran in 1978, and in Tunisia and Egypt in 2010–2011. In these spontaneous revolutions, usually the first development that occurs is cracks in the authoritarianism of the state. The political opening thus created provides the space for the emergence of a social movement. This social movement then grows into mass mobilization and is directed by leaders emerging from within those mobilized. The resulting force eventually pushes the crumbling state to collapse. These revolutions do not have an obvious endgame other than the collapse of the Old Order, with their leaders, ideologies, and visions of the post-revolutionary era slowly emerging only as the revolutionary process unfolds. Even after the revolution succeeds, the first crop of leading figures seldom ends up being the revolution's eventual victors. Only those with access to institutions can wrest the spontaneity of the revolution and direct it for their own purposes.

Not all revolutions enable the masses to overwhelm and overthrow the state. There are instances, in fact, when the empowered forces of society and the actors in charge of the state reach a negative equilibrium of sorts. This occurs when social actors are empowered just enough to be able to defy the state but not overthrow it, and when state actors are weakened but not enough to lose their grip completely. In such circumstances, often the only option is for actors from both sides to negotiate and to agree on certain broad parameters based on which a new political system can be constructed. This kind of a revolution, in which mass mobilization results in a significant weakening but not collapse of the state, may be classified as a negotiated revolution.

What turns a revolution into a negotiated one is the way in which power is transferred from incumbents to victorious revolutionaries. If in the aftermath of mass mobilization the state begins to crumble – through, for example, mass desertions from the army or the defections of its key figures – then the revolutionary wave sweeps increasingly confident, assertive victors into office. This is what occurred in the spontaneous revolutions of France in 1789 and Iran in 1979. But when state institutions remain relatively intact and defections are sufficiently limited so as to erode but not completely deplete the powers of the incumbents, the two sides often see compromise and negotiation as the most viable, and often the safest, option before them. These negotiated transitions can have equally revolutionary outcomes, as they did in Eastern and Central Europe in the late 1980s and in South Africa in the early 1990s.<sup>6</sup>

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There are some other revolutions that are planned. In these revolutions the first development is the appearance of revolutionary leaders, whose goal it is to garner mass support in order to topple the dictatorship. These revolutions have a clear plan for capturing power, a tool-kit of ideological implements for getting the people to follow them, and a clear vision of what the post-revolutionary era looks like. Part of the plan, a big part actually, is to militarily defeat the incumbent regime. Doing so requires launching an armed campaign from the countryside, where the state's reach is often already precarious. Only if and when the state collapses does mass mobilization occur in any meaningful way, directed now by leaders of the new state and put to use for purposes of consolidating the gains of the revolution.

Spontaneous, planned, and negotiated revolutions are ideal types. What matters in each revolution is the extent to which planning and deliberate actions, spontaneity and situational developments, and negotiated exits versus flights from power become preponderant. Most revolutions involve elements of all. The key distinguishing factor between the different types of revolutions has to do with the *timing* of the appearance of state weakness, organized opposition groups, and individuals who perceive of themselves – and are generally seen by the public – as leaders of the revolution. In spontaneous revolutions, state weakness occurs first, opening up space for political opposition, from within which one of the many groups jockeying for the leadership of the brewing movement emerges on top and leads the revolution. In planned revolutions, groups seeking to defeat the state and to capture political power appear first, and if they succeed in their goal of leading a revolution, then they use state power to mobilize the broader population. In both instances, the pre-revolutionary state's military defeat, or the defection of its armed forces, are key to the revolution's success. But if the state's weakness is not to the point of total defeat, but it cannot effectively reverse society's empowerment either, then most often the next step involves negotiations and a negotiated transfer of power.

In most instances, we see the concurrent occurrence of multiple developments. In Russia, for example, anti-state activists had been plotting the Tsarist state's overthrow long before the February and October Revolutions of 1917 took place. But it was largely the state's self-inflicted wounds, beginning especially with the humiliating loss to Japan in the Russo-Japanese War of 1905, that paved the way for the largely spontaneous revolution of February 1917. The fragile state that

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subsequently came to power was too saddled with economic and institutional dysfunctions, and its own ineptitude, to withstand the highly organized Bolsheviks' plans for capturing political power. Essentially what transpired in Russia was a spontaneous revolution in February 1917 followed in October by a planned one.

In examining the key aspects of planned revolutions, I draw heavily from the examples of the Russian, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Cuban revolutions, as well as Che Guevara's failed Bolivian adventure. Nicaragua's 1979 revolution was also largely planned and carried out by the Sandinista National Liberation Front, FSLN, though in addition to guerrilla warfare and urban insurrection it also included a number of general strikes; political work among workers and peasants; and support from important sectors such as the bourgeoisie, intellectuals, and the church.<sup>7</sup> Another planned revolution was attempted in South Africa, led by the African National Congress and its imprisoned leader Nelson Mandela. The resulting political impasse between the ANC and the ruling National Party, all in the international glare, prompted the two to negotiate their way into a new era for the country.

Similar to South Africa, the revolutions that brought down communist regimes in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 culminated in and were largely made possible through negotiated power transitions. Some scholars have called these revolutions "anti-revolutionary" because of their commitment to nonviolence and their concern not so much with the capture of power but with reclaiming public space for thought and self-organization.<sup>8</sup> But what transpired in countries such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, Romania, and East Germany does indeed meet all the criteria of revolutions laid out earlier; not all revolutions must entail violence in order to succeed.

Indeed, the question of when or whether at all revolutions "succeed" is most elusive in the case of spontaneous revolutions. In these revolutions, the goals of the revolution are seldom clearly articulated in the early periods of the uprising, and the many competing groups that take part in the effort to overthrow the state each have their own goals and their own interpretations of what the post-revolutionary era should look like. At least at the very beginning, there are no clear leaders. There is in fact no "revolution" to speak of at first, and therefore there are no clear ideological blueprints for an ideal tomorrow. Differences within the increasingly "revolutionary" coalition are only settled when one group manages to maneuver its way to the top

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and to emerge as the revolution's leading force. Spontaneous revolutions by nature have competing visions, and seldom is there room in the post-revolutionary era for more than one vision.

This inherently hazy nature of spontaneous revolutions has prompted the sociologist Asef Bayat to question whether the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 were revolutions at all. Bayat's argument is premised on the assertion that the 2011 uprisings "lacked any associated intellectual production," and had no "set of ideas, concepts, and philosophies" that informed "the ideational subconscious of the rebels, affecting their vision or choice of strategies and type of leadership." Moreover, he argues, the Arab uprisings lacked similar levels of radicalism in political and economic outlook as compared to similar, earlier rebellions.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, what transpired in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen was neither a revolution nor a reform but what Bayat calls a "refolution," a "revolutionary movement that emerged to compel the incumbent states to change themselves, to carry out meaning reforms on behalf of the revolution."<sup>10</sup> These uprisings, he maintains, "looked like revolution in terms of mobilization but like reform in terms of change."<sup>11</sup>

Bayat is not necessarily incorrect in questioning whether what transpired in the Arab world was indeed revolution or something else – mere chaos and instability, civil wars fueled by regional rivalries, machinations by outside powers, etc. Admittedly, in terms of the sheer time they took to unfold, the Arab uprisings of 2011 lacked the scale and length of the French and Iranian revolutions. But the absence of "concepts and philosophies" is a characteristic of all spontaneous revolutions, and the revolution's supposed hijacking is a corollary of who succeeds in getting power and who does not. In the same way that Iran's secular opponents of the Shah felt their revolution was hijacked by Ayatollah Khomeini and his religious collaborators, Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood activists and the armed forces both accused each other of hijacking the country's January 25 Revolution. That fateful day in 2011 in Egypt did indeed mark the highlight of what was quickly becoming a revolution of historic importance. But the July 2013 coup by General Abdel Fatah el-Sisi restored old patterns of state–society relations and reversed whatever changes were beginning to be initiated in the interim. Elsewhere, in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, elite divisions and outside intervention combined to plunge the countries into civil war, and talk of any revolution in these places in the sense discussed here

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would be meaningless. Only in Tunisia did a revolution take place, with a power transition that involved comparatively little violence but was instead anchored in talks and negotiations. The outcome, for the time being at least, has been no less revolutionary.

In constructing the book's argument, I have relied on insights offered by all four generations of revolutionary theorists as delineated by George Lawson. Lawson points out that the study of revolutions so far can be divided into four principal, if not necessarily distinct, generations.<sup>12</sup> The first generation, appearing prior to the Second World War and of whom Crane Brinton's writings were the most representative, approached revolutions from a "natural history" perspective, focusing on the symptoms of political decay and social disequilibrium in the lead-up to and after revolutions. A second generation of studies, appearing mostly after WWII, examined the causal links between modernization and uprisings, alternately focusing on social dissynchronization (Chalmers Johnson), unfulfilled expectations (James Davies), or relative deprivation (Ted Robert Gurr). Structuralist analyses of revolutions, popular from the 1960s to the 1980s, constituted a third generation. These studies pointed to the formative roles played by domestic and international structures – e.g., more powerful patron states, domestic classes such as the peasantry and the bourgeoisie, wars, etc. – and were represented by the pioneering works of Barrington Moore, Theda Skocpol, and Jack Goldstone. A fourth generation, to which I presume this book belongs, looks at the complex interactions between international relations, political crises, and social developments that lead to the eruption of revolutions and in turn shape their outcomes and their consequences.

More specifically, in the chapters to come, I draw the reader's attention to the continued reoccurrence of four factors in all revolutions, be they planned, spontaneous, or negotiated. In theorizing about revolutions, these four factors constitute the central pillars of any analytical framework. They include institutional factors, the international context, leadership and agency, and the economy. Any analysis of revolutions must take these factors into account, all of which are interconnected and cannot be altogether disentangled from one another. Institutions determine or influence power relationships, within the state, between the state and society, and among social actors and contenders for power. These institutional power relationships take place within a larger, international context, with direct bearing on their strength or weakness and the resources at their disposal.



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Resources, and more broadly the economy, are also important, as they all too often influence not only the strength of institutions but also, as we will see in the case of Eastern Europe in the late 1980s, the priorities of social actors and how they steer the emerging post-revolutionary state. This touches on the importance of agency, conceptualized here as the ability of individuals to make their own decisions. Especially in planned revolutions, and at the historic critical junctures that emerge in the aftermath of all revolutionary captures of power, the decisions that are made by leaders can have lasting and monumental consequences.<sup>13</sup> In simple terms, Nelson Mandela had democratic convictions, but Lenin, Mao, Ho Chi Minh, Castro, and Khomeini did not. While not the sole determinants in the revolutions these individuals led, their personal convictions were not unimportant in shaping the institutional outcomes and arrangements that emerged following their ascent to power.

### **Plan of the Book**

The following chapters lay out a theoretical framework for the study of the causes, processes, and outcomes of planned, spontaneous, and negotiated revolutions. Chapters 2 and 3 examine planned and spontaneous revolutions respectively. Chapter 2 analyzes the means and methods employed by would-be revolutionaries in their deliberate, planned efforts to capture political power. The chapter argues that regardless of their specific ideological coloring, all such efforts are essentially motivated by deep-seated nationalist sentiments, feature important roles for the group's leadership and the vanguard party, and are accomplished through armed struggle and the mobilization of guerrilla fighters and other revolutionary foot soldiers.

Chapter 3 examines spontaneous revolutions, focusing on how state vulnerability and collapse provide opportunities for the emergence of scattered acts of protest and opposition, which in turn grow into social movements, and from there snowball into revolutionary mass mobilization. In the process, and only with time and emerging opportunities, do the revolution's leaders and their ultimate vision for the post-revolutionary order become clear.

Once a revolution succeeds, the state that emerges is not only constituted differently from the one it replaces, but it also assumes a different profile and posture in relation to its domestic and international

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environments. Chapter 4 analyzes the institutional makeup and priorities of post-revolutionary states. The chapter focuses specifically on how new state leaders set out to craft the institutional arrangements through which they govern, and the challenges, both political and economic, they are likely to face in the process.

Society also assumes certain specific features following revolutions, a product not just of the experience of having gone through the revolutionary movement but of the efforts and priorities of the new, emerging post-revolutionary state. Chapter 5 examines state–society relations in the aftermath of revolutions. Revolutions blow the lid off of societies that have long suffered the pressures of dictatorship and despotism. The natural impulse is to hold on to the gains and freedoms thus acquired, not all of which sit well with the new heirs of the state. What ensues may not necessarily be a state–society tug of war, though it often is, but efforts by the state to create a new conception of citizenship in line with a newly emerging political culture. Within this context, dissent and opposition to the new order assume specific features.

Throughout, in highlighting the importance of the various themes and factors under discussion here, I make references to and draw examples from various episodes involving different revolutions. I present a brief chronology of these revolutions at the end of the book. This chronology is preceded by the book’s Conclusion, Chapter 6. In addition to summing up the book’s main findings, the final chapter analyzes some of the more effective ways in which the states of the twenty-first century try to stave off revolutions. Such efforts have gone some ways toward strengthening authoritarian regimes and prolonging their longevity. So long as there are dictatorships, however, future revolutions remain very much a possibility.