The Uprisings in Egypt

The Mobilisation and Ban of Popular Committees and Independent Trade Unions

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Committees and Independent Trade Unions

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To Shaimaa al-Sabbagh
(1983-2015)

"We will topple this regime, created on the back of the protest law"
(Mahiennour el-Massry, 2014)

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ABSTRACT

By adopting Social Movement Theories (SMT) as a basic framework to analyze the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East, I disentangle the role of alternative networks and other forms of political conflict in reference to the Egyptian case in mobilising and forming a potential revolutionary movement. However, the intervention of the military junta, on the one hand, did not allow the proto-movement to develop into a revolution and, on the other hand, hindered the fulfilment of demands for "Social Justice" coming from the people.

This book aims to test the hypothesis of how during the Egyptian 2011 uprisings the encounter in public spaces of more organised political oppositionists with other anti-regime elements demobilised the social movements associated with the so-called "Arab Spring". Through participatory methods, the research hypothesis of this book will be tested with reference to field work research involving Popular Committees and independent trade unions in two areas of Cairo and Mahalla al-Kubra. Driving factors for the differential impact of state repression and Political Islam on mobilisation will be identified through the analysis of the two in-depth case studies and, in a comparative perspective, with similar forms of political conflict in other Middle Eastern countries. Semi-structured interviews and participatory research will be used in order to conduct the analysis.

In this book, I argue that during the 2011 uprisings in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood monopolised the space of dissent preventing the formation of common identities among the protesters. Especially social actors in the "Egyptian Street" (e.g. independent trade unions and Popular Committees) and other opposition groups (Liberals, Socialists, Leftists, anarchists) did not find any place within the post-uprisings government and finally have been demobilised by the politics and political discourse of a pseudo Neo-Nasserism, implemented by the regime after the 2013 military coup.

My case studies will show the effects of political mobilisation and military repression on Egyptian civil society, especially at the levels of workers' movements and Popular Committees. I will try to verify if this derived

from a low ideological and structural integration between Islamists and Leftist political groups or from other reasons (state-society relations, army control over economy, youth disengagement, etc.).

The final sections of the book broadens the perspective and addresses the implications of the findings on the workings of Popular Committees in other contexts in the Middle East and on the more general question raised in terms of democratisation; more specifically, I discuss to what extent the effectiveness of Political Islam in activating the social proto-movement might be replaced by more organised oppositional forces oriented towards social and workers' rights.

PREFACE

I began travelling in the Middle East on long expeditions with my family when I was very young. Our first trip was to Syria in 1999 and I loved this country. Then I decided to write my Italian degree thesis on the reformist movement in Iran and I worked in the political section of the Italian Embassy in Teheran to that end. I really enjoyed studying Iranian civil society and often returned to that wonderful country after my graduation. All my first job experiences were informed by my interest for the Middle East. Since 2005, I decided to learn spoken Arabic after having studied standard Arabic at college. That same year, I began working for think tanks and NGOs focused on human rights and Euro-Mediterranean cooperation. In 2009, I finally decided to leave my job and move to Egypt.

In Cairo, initially I worked as an Italian language teacher at the Italian School, at the Italian Cultural Institute (Zamalek) and at the American University. Later I began work as a journalist at the English-speaking newspaper, *al-Ahram weekly*. My editor in chief was the great Egyptian writer, Youssef Rakha (author of the "The Book of the Sultan's Seal", 2016). When the events in Tahrir Square began to unfold I was still in Italy for the new year holidays. I landed in Cairo on the night of January 29, 2011 (four days after the first demonstrations), in the company of a friend working for the World Bank. They advised us to sleep in the airport. And we did. The next day, we thought the safest way to get to Downtown Cairo and join in was to take an ordinary taxi with some Egyptians.

Benjamin, my friend, mentioned that his house had just been attacked by unknown looters that very night. On our way back home, in Heliopolis, it was the first time I remember noticing something that was to become much clearer in the ensuing months - that is the way thugs had infiltrated Popular Committees. That was the way in which ordinary citizens organised at the micro-level to respond to the absence of police and security personnel.

On this occasion – they tried to stop the taxi on the grounds that we were foreigners, but our Egyptian fellow-travellers asked them to give us a break, and in the end they let us go. I was fascinated by this unique way of

mobilizing a local neighbourhood and later found that a similar mobilisation was up and running in my vicinity too. I was living behind the Odeon Cinema, close to TalaatHarb Street.

A few days after, on the morning of February 2, 2011, together with other Italians, we were suddenly surrounded by a group of *baltagi* (thugs) in Shubra on our way home to WestelBalad. They were carrying chains and swords. Later they delivered us to the *Mukabarat*. When it was time to let us go they questioned me particularly keenly about my Iranian visas. I remember that a Canadian intervened on my behalf asking for the release of all of us. In this case, the security personnel only briefly detained us, bringing us back to downtown Cairo the same evening, leaving us along the Corniche of the Zamalek district, where intense clashes between demonstrators and the police were still taking place.

Thus, the real change in direction for my studies, together with my love for the region as a whole, was intimately related to the so-called "Arab Spring". It was following the revolutionary dreams of so many comrades that I learned all I know about reporting in a context of widespread political mobilisation. I spent my time following the events of grassroots mobilisation, witnessing the violence of the police battling against the aspirations of the younger generations. As a scholar I have often drawn upon my previous experiences in the 2011 protests to enhance my study of this interesting region in a context of potential political transformation.

That year, from February 2011 onwards until June 2016, I became a correspondent for the Italian left-wing newspaper *il Manifesto*, covering Tahrir Square events. Between 2011 and 2015 I also reported extensively for European mainstream and specialised media. I was arranging constant interviews and meetings with activists and experts, and I began to use this overall access to form some rather original insights into political developments in Egypt, gradually arriving at a better understanding of these events that I daily witnessed. I met great people, including journalists and bloggers such as AhdafSoueif, Wael Abbas, Hossam el-Hamalawi, Alaa Abdel Fattah, Mahiennour el-Masri while these incredible events were under way.

I decided to opt for a PhD after finishing my Masters in Middle Eastern Studies, in the politics department at SOAS. Looking on from abroad for a while as these events unfolded, I soon thought that I had to spend more time in Egypt. I had been reading Foucault, Gramsci, Beinin and Tripp,

and I was convinced that among the most interesting outcomes of the 2011 events, there was the rise of a working-class-based social movement. Several opportunities to report back from events in Suez and 14 Mahalla al-Kubra only confirmed for me the central relevance of the workers' movements in Egypt, despite puny coverage of the strikes by mainstream media.

After the military coup in 2013, I was going daily to Rabaa al-Adaweya to cover Muslim Brotherhood sit-ins calling for the defence of the legitimacy of former president Mohammed Morsi. My reading of the August massacre, when the sit-in was "cleared" by security personnel, is that this will be remembered as one of the most ignominious attacks on human rights in Egyptian history. It was very hot and Ramadan. I often had iftar with the demonstrators, and I spent many hours in the Media Centre close to the Rabaa mosque.

The day of the assault on the sit-in, I was woken by a phone call from the Muslim Brotherhood politician, Jihad al-Haddad, who said that they knew the police were going to attack them. I joined MedinatNassr at ten o clock. And I witnessed scenes of shocking devastation. I knew some of the people who were killed on this day. At that time I was living in Agouza and I remember that my flatmates were very afraid for me. They were strict respecters of the curfew, very aware of the minor thugs hanging around our house.

Meanwhile, I was deciding that it would have been really great to begin a general study of the patterns of mobilisation and demobilisation of the Egyptian oppositionists both before and after the Tahrir Square occupation, and in both urban and peripheral contexts. Ultimately I settled on a focus on the Popular Committees in the Cairo district of Sayeda Zeinab and the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) in Mahalla al-Kubra. They seemed to me from what I had witnessed to manifest the most interesting outcomes of the uprisings.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AKP   Justice and Development Party
CGTT   Confederation Générale Tunisienne du Travail
CTUWS   Center for Trade Union and Workers Services
ECESR   Egyptian Centre for Economic and Social Rights
ECRF   Egyptian Coordination of Rights and Freedoms
EDLC   Egyptian Democratic Labour Council
EFITU   Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions
ELDF   Egyptian Life for Development Foundation
ERSAP   Economic Reform and Structural Adjustment Program
ETUF   Egyptian Trade Unions Federation
EU   European Union
FJP   Freedom and Justice Party
FSA   Free Syrian Army
HDP   People's Democratic Party
IAEA   International Atomic Energy Agency
IMF   International Monetary Fund
ISIS   Islamic State
KDP   Kurdistan Democratic Party
KNC   Kurdish National Council
LGBT   Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
LPG   Liquefied Petroleum Gas
LTDH   Tunisian Human Rights League
MB   Muslim Brotherhood
MENA   Middle East and North Africa
NGC   National General Congress
NDP   National Democratic Party
NGO   Non-Governmental Organisations
NSF   National Salvation Front
NSM   New Social Movements
PKK   Kurdistan Workers' Party
PVT   Private Voluntary Organisations
PYD   Democratic Union Party
RCC   Revolutionary Command Council
RETAU   Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers
RNN   Rassd News Network

RS   Revolutionary Socialists
SDF   Syrian Democratic Forces
SCAF   Supreme Council of the Armed Forces
SMT   Social Movements Theories
UGTT   Tunisian General Labour Union
US   United States
UTICA   Tunisian Confederation of Industry, Trade and Handicrafts
YPG   People's Protection Units
YPJ   Women's Protection Units

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The overthrow of the authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt is the most important achievement of the 2011 Arab Uprisings. At first the media and academic accounts presented the protests as a revolution occurring in a limited space – a Square - and lasting a couple of weeks. Later, some academic works (Achcar, Alexander, and della Porta)[1] highlighted that the movement was the result of a longstanding social struggle where ordinary people were a central trigger of the grassroots protests. This book tries to draw upon this approach narrowing the gap between Social Movement Theories (SMT) and the actual flow of events during the 2011 uprisings in the Middle East. As we will discuss in this book, from the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) to the Egyptian workers' movements, from the People's Democratic Party (HDP) in Turkey to the democratic autonomy, theorised by Abdullah Öcalan and put in practice in Syrian Kurdistan, the 2011 uprisings did not only open the Pandora's box of Political Islam in the Middle East but also facilitated many other oppositional movements.

This book will be focused on the Egyptian case. Here the Muslim Brotherhood monopolised the public and political space after the 18 days of protests in Tahrir Square. Likewise, the army control over the different oppositional movements had a specific influence on the initial democratic transition. In other words, from the removal of Mubarak (2011) until the 2013 military coup, the army worked to isolate the political actors and divide and demobilise the proto-movement. This strategy prevented the further development of the uprisings and enabled the resurgence of the "Deep State" and, along with it, of more or less organised waves of terrorism[2] and an unprecedented state crackdown on dissent and political

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[1] Achcar, G., *The People Want. A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Saqi Books, 2013.
[2] Filiu, J. P., *From Deep State to Islamic State. The Arab Counter-Revolution and its Jihadi Legacy*, Hurst Publishers, 2014.

participation. This fully blocked the demonstrations and a potential transformation of the uprisings into a revolution and a possible reshaping of atomised individuals into a collectivity[3].

Firstly, I will show the important, pivotal role, of street movements in the recent events (2011-2012). If there are many studies of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafi* groups and the effects of the *infitah* policies at different levels on Egyptian society and the security apparatus, still a great deal needs to be done for a better understanding of other social groups, often misrepresented by the mainstream media: social and workers' movements, alternative networks and street politics, leftists and anarchist activists and their relations with more structured groups and the workings of the state.

Furthermore, this book will seek to demonstrate that, in the Egyptian case, if, at the very beginning, the encounter with the Muslim Brotherhood's activists increased the potential for a revolutionary movement, later, it disrupted the agency and demands of the social actors in the streets. Eventually, it might be argued that the threat of, and then the intervention by, the army altered the demands coming from the street. Moreover, the precipitous electoral process may have hindered the revolutionary potential and undermined the saliency of the demands of street activists.

This book will try to disentangle, in a potentially revolutionary but still authoritarian context, the dynamics of mobilisation and demobilisation in two Egyptian neighbourhoods during and after the 2011 uprisings. In the first part, in Chapters 2 and 3, I will answer to the questions: how did the social proto-movements mobilise and interact with more established political parties? How did the state react to the protests in order to demobilise the oppositional movements? What has been the place of "Bread, Freedom and Social Justice" among the demands of the demonstrators? In the second part, in Chapters 4 and 5, I will answer the questions: to what extent did the encounter in urban and peripheral neighbourhoods between non-organised groups and more defined political movements affect the workers' proto-movement and the Egyptian civil society? How did the Popular Committees and Independent Trade Unions work, and did their operations evolve when the popular unrest ended? In the third part, in Chapters 6 and 7, I will focus on the commonalities

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[3] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 158-159.

between the Egyptian case and the recent upheaval in other countries, especially in reference to leftist oppositional movements.

1.1 The Breakdown of Authoritarian Regimes

"The People want to overthrow the regime" was one of the most symbolic slogans of the recent protests in the Middle East[4]. In December 2010 a street vendor in Tunisia set himself on fire. In a few days, widespread demonstrations led to the end of Ben Ali's regime. On January 25 2011 a demonstration in solidarity with the Tunisian movement took place in Cairo, transforming Tahrir Square into a permanent encampment with hundreds of thousands of demonstrations asking for the end of Hosni Mubarak's regime. The reaction of the Egyptian army arrived three days later with tanks surrounding the protestors. In February and March 2011, protests of different sizes took place in Daraa, a province in the south of Syria, against the al-Assad regime; in Sanaa asking for the end of the Abdallah Saleh presidency in Yemen; some protests[5] took place in Tripoli and Benghazi against the arbitrary practices of the Libyan Colonel Muammar Gaddafi; demonstrations took place in Manama (Bahrain); a protest began in Azadi Square in Tehran (2011) and later on in Gezi Park in Istanbul (2013). Although these protests had different backgrounds, agencies, practices and targets, they took place in a context, firstly, of economic crisis and consolidated inequalities, secondly, the decline of the key ideologies[6]: revolutionary nationalism, Marxism-Leninism and Islamism, thirdly, of decline of representative democracy: and the rise of anti-austerity, anti-capitalist, anti-politics and occupy movements.

As Hinnebusch argued,

> The challenge authoritarian regimes face is that once societies reach a certain level of social mobilisation regimes that do not accommodate demands for political participation risk they will take revolutionary forms unless otherwise contained by exceptional means such as 'totalitarianism'. MENA states were in a middle range of modernisation where democratisation pressures were significant but could still seemingly be contained and indeed had been in the republics for decades, first by a generation of populist, more inclusive, forms of authoritarianism, later by post-populist

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[4] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 13.
[5] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 166.
[6] Bayat, A. The Arab Spring and its Surprises, *Development and Change*, Volume 44 Issue 3, International Institute of Social Studies, 2013, p. 599.

'upgrading'. Modernisation theories locate the roots of the uprisings in a growing imbalance between social mobilisation and political incorporation.[7]

After eight years of mobilisation and demobilisation, included a limited period of "Islamic Awakening", army repressions, foreign interventions and civil wars, the 2011 social movements in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA), especially in reference to the Egyptian and the Tunisian cases, can be defined as uprisings[8].

As Badiou states, in Egypt and Tunisia in 2011, "The inexistent has arisen. That is why we refer to uprising: people were lying down, submissive; they are getting up, picking themselves up, rising up. This rising is the rising of existence itself: the poor have not become rich; people who were unarmed are not now armed, and so forth. Basically nothing changed. What has occurred is restitution of the existence of the inexistent"[9].

Thus, considering the noted role of street politics as a means of mass mobilisation, I will describe the Egyptian oppositional forces as non-movements. As Bayat[10] states, "Non-movements refer to the collective actions of non-collective actors; they embody shared practices of large numbers of ordinary people whose fragmented but similar activities trigger much social change, even though these practices are rarely guided by an ideology or recognizable leaderships and organisations".

The first question we might raise: did this multifaceted proto-movement develop into a revolutionary movement? The life and death of the revolutionary process is central to this research. As Skocpol[11] highlighted, a revolution can be triggered by the spread of inequalities. Thus, street protests reinforce the vulnerability of the regime by showing the weakness of the state. Moreover, a social movement can grow when rising economic expectations encounter an economic slow-down or austerity[12]. However,

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[7] Hinnebusch, R. 'Introduction: understanding the consequences of the Arab uprisings – starting points and divergent trajectories', *Democratization*, Vol. 22 (2), March 2015, p. 208.

[8] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 14.

[9] Badiou, A. *The Rebirth of History. Times of Riots and Uprisings*, London, Verso, 2012, p. 56.

[10] Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, *How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*, Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013, p. 14.

[11] Skocpol, T. *Social Revolutions in the Modern World*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994.

[12] Davies, J. C. *When Men Revolt and Why*, London, Transaction, 1971.

these factors may not be sufficient for accounting for the emergence of social movements that play a role in revolutions. As Dunn[13] argued, it is still vital to focus on what is being attempted and what is actually achieved by movements. In other words, a revolution can best be defined in retrospect. With references to the aforementioned literature, the 2011-2012 uprisings in Egypt would be described as social non-movements. Egyptian society was deeply divided by glaring social inequalities[14]. Moreover, as a result of policies of economic liberalisation (*infitah*), the lower strata of the population were affected by the retreat of the state as a distributor of social and economic goods and a sudden increase in vegetable prices in the urban markets in the wake of the 2008 global economic crisis[15] and in the months before the 2011 uprisings[16].

1.1.1 Islamists and Dissent in Authoritarian Regimes

The monopolisation of political dissent by Islamist groups is a common feature of many Arab and Middle Eastern countries. James Scott, in *Weapons of the Weak*[17], explained how Islamists monopolised the space of dissent in the village of Sadaka. As Bayat[18] notes, a reference to Scott's ethnographic studies focusing on individual reactions of peasants, along with Foucault's decentred notion of power and the revival of the concept of Neo-Gramscian hegemony can serve to enhance a "micro-politics" perspective on social movements.

Placing these approaches in the context of the Egyptian proto-movement (2010-2012), I would argue that not only did the Islamists monopolise the opposition movements in the pre-revolutionary phase but, during the uprisings, they manipulated street movements and lesser organised entities in order to use and then deactivate their revolutionary potential.

Thus, this book seeks to explain how the proto-movement, its internal relations and with the activities of the state (e.g. ruling and military elites),

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[13] Dunn, J. *Modern revolutions: an introduction to the analysis of a political phenomenon*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989.
[14] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 26-39.
[15] Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt, Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*, Haymarket Books, Chicago, Illinois, 2013, p.2.
[16] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 27 and 32.
[17] Scott, J. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.
[18] Bayat, A. *Life as Politics*, p. 51.

evolved before the 2011 uprisings, during the Islamist monopolisation of power (2012-2013) and after the 2013 military coup.

In order to disentangle the role of dissent in the context of authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, I will draw upon the work of Timothy Mitchell[19]. Mitchell's assertion that the blurred relations between state and society are used to produce and reproduce the power of the former can be shown to be relevant for understanding the politics of the Egyptian state. For these reasons, if, in the 1990s, the state was extensively disengaged from offering public services, the level of participation in informal networks increased. More specifically, this practice has been brought about by the exploitation of political dissent and then through political control of civil society[20].

Michel Foucault[21] described power as the reproduction of a two-dimensional reality (structure vs. practice). This, he argued, determined the formation of a culture of the state as a means of control civil society. Both Mitchell and Foucault's approaches are very useful to explain the evolution of state-society relations in modern Egypt.

1.1.2 The "Deep State" and *Infitah* Policies

We cannot discuss the state reaction to the 2011 uprisings, if we do not describe the workings of capitalism in Egypt[22]. President Anwar al-Sadat started the "open door" policies or the economic liberalisation (*infitah*) in the mid-1970s, on the pattern of the Nasser's failure and, reinvigorated by Hosni Mubarak, in 1980s and 1990s, transformed the state from developmental to managerial[23]. This was not the consequence of the crisis of the state but a change in the "strategy of the elite" or a "structural

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[19] Mitchell, T. 'Everyday Metaphors of Power', *Theory and Strategy*, Springer, Vol. 19, No. 5, (Oct. 1990), pp. 545-577.
[20] Mitchell, T. *Colonising Egypt*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1991.
[21] Foucault, M. *Discipline and Punish*., New York, Pantheon, 1977.
[22] Luciani, G. 'Linking Economic and Political Reform in the Middle East'. In Schlumberger, O. (ed.). *Debating Arab Authoritarianism: Dynamics and Durability in Nondemocratic Regimes.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 163.
[23] Owen, R. in Hakimian, H and Moshaver, Z. (eds.) *The State and Global Change: The Political Economy of Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*, Richmond, Curzon, 2001, pp. 234-237.

adjustment"[24] for its own survival. Those policies demonstrated the resilience of the state and the army and entailed widespread privatisation (e.g. tourism and agriculture sectors), the separation of the ownership of the industries from the management, corresponding to the creation of joint ventures with foreign private capital[25]. Later on, Sadat's successor, Hosni Mubarak, paved the way for unequal growth based on the reduction of the public sector workforce, and cuts to food and transportation subsides.

During the three decades of the Mubarak's regime, the retreat of the state brought about new forms of crony capitalism[26] enhancing the political power of business cliques. Waves of demonstrations (e.g. 1977, 1985, 2003, 2005, and 2008), related to prices increases, unemployment and economic stagnation, erupted in a context of political repression or co-optation.

As Warkotsch argues, if "Gamal Abdel Nasser limited political liberties and participation while increasing economic incorporation, Sadat shifted this balance towards more participation for less economic incorporation"[27], later Hosni Mubarak impoverished both lower and middle classes increasing repression "to a degree where it seemed arbitrary even to people not usually involved with the political sphere".

As della Porta[28] highlights in this instance, "Political and economic power became in fact more intertwined under Mubarak, especially since the early 2000s. At the core of the regime, the people close to the President were in leading positions in the ruling NDP, including as ministers or personal advisers to the president [...] Privatisation increased quickly from 2004 onwards, while there was instead a de-liberalisation in the political sphere".

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[24] Tripp, C. *States, Elites and the Management*, In: Hakimian, H. and Moshaver, Z. (eds.): *The State and Global Change. The Political Economy of Transition in the Middle East and North Africa*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 2001, p. 222.

[25] Ayubi, N. 'Etatisme versus Privatization: the changing economic role of the state in nine Arab countries'. In Handoussa, H. (ed.) *Economic Transition in the Middle East*, Cairo, American University Press, 1997, pp. 129-134.

[26] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, pp. 53-80.

[27] Warkotsch J. in Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy, Comparing 1989 and 2011*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 187-188.

[28] Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 187.

However, crony capitalism and the extremely unequal distribution of the wealth did not entail that Egypt, during the 2011 uprisings, was in a revolutionary crisis. As we shall further discuss, the resilience of the state institutions and the poorly structured social proto-movements never allowed a coherent change in the structure of power.

1.1.3 The Protests before the 2011 Uprisings

The uprisings have been described as a long-term revolutionary process[29] starting long before the 2011's upheaval. For example in Egypt, the funds for subsidies dropped "from 14.5% of government expenditures in 1980-81 to 5.6% in 1996-97"[30]. The Egyptian government dropped the number of subsidised food items, reducing the portions and allowing the price of sugar and bread to rice[31].

As Hinnebusch[32] highlights, the possibility to begin a proto-movement is already intrinsic within the workings of authoritarian regimes:

> Mobilisation requires not just grievances, but also a permissive opportunity structure in which societal opposition can overcome atomisation and combine for collective action. Where society is fragmented along identity lines, mass mobilisation is obstructed; in a homogeneous society shared identity facilitates it [...] Civil society was much more advanced in Egypt and Tunisia because the early onset of neo-liberalism had both necessitated greater tolerance for it and had also led to years of protest experience by activists that generated organisational skills and networks that would be crucial in the uprisings.

In a preliminary stage, the cooperation between the Muslim Brotherhood, workers' movements, street movements, leftists and other secular movements, prevented by Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar al-Sadat, had as a common target the fight against the arbitrary methods of the police that all these groups widely experienced long before the Tahrir Square occupation.

Thus della Porta notes that "In the early 1970s, an Islamist student movement had been used by Sadat to counterbalance the Left. Initially apolitical, it had concentrated on Islamic book fairs, selling of Islamic

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[29] Achcar, G. *The People Want*, p. 17.
[30] Hanieh, A. *Lineages of Revolt, p. 69.*
[31] *Ibid.*
[32] Hinnebusch, R. *Understanding the consequences of the Arab uprisings*, p. 211.

clothes, provision of services to the community. Violence then started with clashes with left-wing students, and, in the words of an activist, 'this then evolved in the concept of changing the bad by the hand, which became essential to the movement' […] In the 1980s and 1990s, the repression of the Islamic movement brought about new waves of radicalisation, with splinter groups emerging from the Muslim Brotherhood".[33]

Between 2004 and 2006 a tactical alliance between Islamists and leftists gradually emerged. As we will see later, this "cooperative differentiation" between the opposition groups, as della Porta defines it, will be refreshed within the 2011 Tahrir proto-movement:

> In the many protests carried out between 2004 and 2006, alliances were built [...] There was even increasing cooperation between left-wingers and Islamists (even the MB), as well as Nasserists. There was certainly a long history of antagonism, fuelled when, in 1977, the Islamists supported Sadat's economic measures against the leftist protestors, accused of conspiracy, and in 1993 the Left reciprocated by supporting the Unified Law for syndicates, which targeted the growing influence of the Islamists. However, some cooperation at the grassroots had developed already in the 1990s, with a major turning point in the 2000s, during the campaigns in support of the Palestinian Intifada. [...] Notwithstanding bitter divisions within and between each area, networks blossomed during waves of activism within the principle of cooperative differentiation, which meant working on the basis of consensus, avoiding divisive slogans, but also keeping independence.[34]

Protests against the police broke out after the murder of the young activist Khaled Said in Alexandria (2010) by a police officer. The *Facebook* page in his memory, administered by a young engineer, Wael Ghonim, has been one the most important symbolic references of the anti-police movement that led to the 2011 uprisings. At that time, the overlapping political discourses of the *Kifaya* (Enough!) movement against the 2005 Mubarak sixth presidential candidacy and the struggles to stop the arbitrary methods of police officers, especially in poor neighbourhood, stimulating an anti-police, anti-Mubarak movement, were the core issues of the 2011 demonstrations.

Protests spread throughout the 2000s, in various waves including the pro-Palestine university mobilisations in 2000, protests against the US

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[33] Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for democracy*, p. 149.
[34] Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for democracy*, pp. 99-100.

invasion of Iraq in 2003, the movements in *Kifaya* in 2004, the march of the judges for independence of the judiciary system in 2006, and workers' protests beginning 2008. As el-Ghobashy notes, "The reality was that Egyptians had been practicing collective action for at least a decade, acquiring organisational experience in that very old form of politics: the street action. Egypt's streets had become parliaments, negotiating tables and battlegrounds rolled into one. To compel unresponsive officials to enact or revoke specific policies, citizens blocked major roads with tree branches and burning tires; organised sit-ins in factory plans and ministers".[35]

1.1.4 Democracy: Continuity and Change

We have seen how in Egypt the 2011 proto-movement was rooted in a longstanding process of antagonism towards the activities of the state. Yet, an initial question must be raised as to whether the 2011 uprisings were about democracy or something else? Post-democratisation analyzes have failed to explain the transition processes taking place in the Middle East after the 2011 uprisings. As Teti argues[36], this is primarily due to a failure to understand democracy as more than a neutral category framed in a liberal and narrowly procedural fashion. Thus, the post-democratisation current has, on the contrary, transformed a contingent model of democracy, rooted and developed in the Western tradition, to explain what the archetype of democracy is[37].

As the activist Gehan Ibrahim explains in an interview for this book: "Should we (the revolutionary forces after the 2013 military coup) fight again against the army, together with the Muslim Brothers? The army is implementing the counter-revolution. However, our democracy should be better than the Western systems in which citizens are forced to choose among two candidates who do not represent the grassroots' demands"[38].

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[35] El-Ghobashy in Della Porta, D. *Mobilizing for Democracy*, p. 101 and also see El-Ghobashy, M. 'The Praxis of the Egyptian Revolution' *Middle East* Report 258 (Spring 2011), pp. 1-7.
[36] Teti, A., Beyond Lies the Wub. Challenges of (Post)-Democratization, *Middle East Critique.* 21 (1), 2012, p.7.
[37] Teti, A., 'Bridging the Gap: IR, Middle East Studies and the Disciplinary Politics of the Area Studies Controversy'. *European Journal of International Relations.* 13(1), 2007, p. 117.
[38] Interview 24. The full list of the interviewees is provided in the next section.

It might be argued that the Egyptian case has little to do with a democratic transition even when compared to the Tunisian 2011 uprisings and the Iranian Revolution in 1979. In other words, it is true that the recent demonstrations in Egypt led to a transition, but this process is not bringing democracy to the country, but it transformed Egypt from an authoritarian to a military regime. Indeed, on the one hand, in Tunisia a progressive constitution (2014) has been approved with the agreement of secular and Islamist political forces. On the other hand, in post-revolutionary Iran, a sentiment of anti-Americanism was forged, there are regular parliamentary and presidential elections, with high turn-outs, an electoral competition among chosen candidates and a strong civil society.

Thus, a second question might be raised as were there in Egypt any sort of democratic outcomes, even liberal democratic ones, after the 2011 uprisings? In Egypt, to a certain extent, the Muslim Brotherhood and *Dostur* party had as their preliminary political aims, liberal democracy. We might quote here as examples *Dostur's*[39] former leader, Mohamed el-Baradei, who called many times for a more democratic transitional process starting with the writing of a new constitution and the Muslim Brotherhood leaders who defended the elected president after the 2013 military coup talking about political legitimacy determined by election results and non-violent methods of dissent. On the other hand, the demands, initially and equally coming from leftist and liberal opponents, in May 2013, for regime change from the Morsi presidency did not correspond to the army and other groups' wishes, which that had little to do with democracy or accountability. In this case, the National Salvation Front (NSF) and other opposition groups validated the decisions of the military junta, through the *Tamarrod* (Rebel) campaign. Some of these forces felt threatened by the winners of the 2012 presidential elections and argued they were not true and consistent democrats[40]. Thus they did not wait until the natural end of the four-year long presidential mandate, forgetting that the respect of electoral outcomes, even if these outcomes were unpalatable for the losers, is one of the central tenets of a liberal democracy and that would be very risky to resort to mass demonstrations which demanded the dissolution of parliament or the removal of the

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[39] In Arabic *Dostur* means Constitution indeed.
[40] Waterbury, J. 'Democracy without Democrats? The potential for political liberalization in the Middle East'. In: Ghassan Salamé (ed.): *Democracy without democrats? The renewal of politics in the Muslim world*. London: Tauris, 1994, pp. 23-48.

president. In doing so, they decided to act as a proxy of the military regime exactly as the Muslim Brotherhood previously did (2012-2013).

It is true that, as Geddes stated, "the ends of authoritarian regimes are [...] problematic"[41]. Thus, in the case of Egypt, most of the literature on *transitology* appeared not applicable. Although experiencing periods of "critical disjunctures*"[42],* as the 2011 uprisings have been, in which the traditional phases of continuity – that is, the self-reproduction of the existing order – are distracted and a window of opportunity to achieve different and diverse alternatives suddenly opened, the Egyptian state was acting in continuity with its traditional methods of operation, especially after the 2013 military coup, eventually transforming the regime from the authoritarian to military variety, as we will discuss in Chapters 2 and 3.

These moments of crisis are critical because, on the one hand, "coherent collectivities of state officials"[43] can launch distinctive new state strategies, insulating themselves from dominant socioeconomic interests and pursuing their own goals (e.g. within the army, the judiciary, the Interior Ministry, the Foreign Affairs Ministry, etc.). On the other hand, if today the Egyptian authorities do not follow democratic processes and thus leaving a broad space to continual internal coups and conspiracies, the political oppositions are still shaped and rooted in same arbitrary methods. Thus, all the political groups never abandoned their specific political objectives with the aim to build-up more inclusive identities forging in a more consistent discourse of democratic transition.

Drawing on the fragmentation of the protesters, the army and its closely allied paramilitary groups spread a general fear of disorder in local neighbourhoods in order to discredit and alter the street movements. As Mitchell has argued in a more general theoretical frame, the control of the state over civil society is reproduced through such clandestine top-down forms of manipulation, which allows a type of constant but ineffective dissent that does not threaten the status quo. In the Egyptian context, these

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[41] Geddes, B. 'What Do We Know about Democratization after Twenty Years?' *Annual Review of Political Science* (2), 1999, p. 29.
[42] Carothers, T. 'The End of the Transition Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy.* 13, 2002, pp. 5-21.
[43] Skocpol, T. 'Bringing the State Back In: Strategies of Analysis in Current Research'. In Evans, P. Rueschemeyer D. & Skocpol T. (eds.).*Bringing the State Back In.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 9.

strategies have been implemented by the military with the use of a variety of methods: nationalist rhetoric, the employing of criminals, the closure of streets surrounding public institutions and the provoking of sectarian clashes.

As we will see in Chapters 2 and 3, in order to deactivate the revolutionary potential of neighbourhood street movements, monopolised and manipulated by the Muslim Brotherhood, a bitter struggle arose between the state and ordinary citizens. Rapidly-called elections deactivated alternative social movements, returning them to the marginal positions they had been in before the uprising began. When the Islamists abandoned the street social movements, their continued occupation of public spaces lost its revolutionary saliency. Henceforth, the images and narratives of the street movements were dominated by the interpretations offered by state television and marginalised by the logic of electioneering in preparation for the struggle at the polls. The street social movements lost their initiative and the control of their narratives.

1.2 Methodology and Ethical Issues

This book will provide an overview of alternative networks and their mobilisation in the public space during and after the Egyptian 2011 uprisings with the specific aim of disentangling the activation and ban of Popular Committees and Independent Trade Unions. The methodology adopted has three components:

1) Literature review

This will be assessed in detail in Chapters 2 and 3 where I tackle the Egyptian 2011 uprisings, and the consequent political repression and also discuss the ideology of the new social movements where I apply the literature concerning SMT and NSMs theories (Abdelrahman, Alexander and Bassiouny, della Porta and Diani, Gelvin, Owen, Tripp) to the Egyptian case.

2)   Semi-structured interviews

The 58 interviewees are prominent experts, activists and stakeholders engaged in the study of the Egyptian and Middle Eastern uprisings or directly active in the protests. The information collected through the interviews and combination of the literature review allows for a

comprehensive understanding of the so-called "Arab Spring" with specific reference to the consequences of the encounter in the public space between more and less organised social actors during the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 military coup in Egypt. The first aim of this book is to tackle the reasons why the unrest did not succeed or lead to a revolution as happened, for instance, in Iran in 1979. This is vital for the later discussion in my case studies of the dynamics of Popular Committees and independent trade unions throughout the revolutionary process.

The semi-structured interviews are problem-centered with the aim to define the targets of protests and the levels of repression, to evaluate the effectiveness of the strategies of the political activists and the repressive methods of the state institutions, and to describe the specific needs and demands of the movement, with reference to workers' movements and "Social Justice". They will also illustrate the structural and social factors influencing strategies of repression and antagonism and thus to derive a definition of the 2011 uprisings while highlighting examples of strengthened Egyptian and Middle Eastern activism in civil society and trade unions. The empirical research will involve Egyptian activists (e.g. Revolutionary Socialists, Socialist Alliance, and Young Islamists), intellectuals and economists (e.g. professors, writers, and bloggers), stakeholders and trade unionists, workers and ordinary citizens, army and police officers[44]. Table I shows the numbers of interviewees per relevant entity.

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[44] The interviews took place during the years in which this research has been conducted (2013-2016) in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, London, Kobane, Mahalla al-Kubra, Diyarbakir, Milan, Rome and Paris; in Arabic, English or Egyptian dialect. This is the full list of the interviewees: 1) Hossam al-Hamalawy, Revolutionary Socialists and workers movement activist (English); 2) Professor Sami Zubaida, Birkbeck University (London); 3) Ammar Abo Bakr, graffiti maker and activist (English); 4) Ahdaf Soueif, writer (English); 5) Jihad al-Haddad, Muslim Brother optician (English); 6) Samir Amin, economist and director of the Third World Forum of Dakar (English); 7) Sonallah Ibrahim, writer and activist of the Socialist Alliance (English); 8) Ahmed, a young soldier who entered Tahrir Square on January 20 (Egyptian dialect); 9) Khaled, conscript at the Ayn Shamps' barracks (Egyptian dialect); 10) a Port Said policemen (Egyptian dialect); 11) Wael Abbas, blogger and activist (English); 12) Professor Roger Owen, Harvard University; 13) Mohammed, a young soldier of Suez (Egyptian dialect); 14) Joel Beinin, Professor of History, Stanford University; 15) Moneim Abul Fotuh, politician and presidential candidate (Arabic); 16) Mahiennur el-Massry, Revolutionary Socialists and lawyer (English); 17) Alaa al-Aswani, writer (English); 18) Khaled Ali, political activist and presidential candidate (English); 19) Hamdin Sabbahi,