

Mobilization and its Interpretation in the Context of Authoritarian Contraction

Protest, Identity and Contentious Repertoire in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

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The relationship between social mobilization and the policing of protest has been investigated for more than four decades. From this work, we have a sense of what tactics will be used on both sides and of what provokes violent behaviour; we have some insights into what consequences are likely when movements take to the street in large numbers, or when protests are crushed by repression; and we have some idea of where to look for information. The bulk of literature on the dynamics of contention, the interaction of social movements and regimes, has focused on the material features of repression and collective actions: Repressions were found to be effective when applied preemptively and selectively, and when police brutality did not surpass a certain threshold. Protest was found to be relatively more successful when non-violent.

Frames as translation mechanisms

Little, however, has been said about the interpretation of events on the ground. Production and interpretation are closely interlinked: As part of their power struggle, social movements and regime elites constantly assign protest and repression events with competing meanings in order to claim moral authority. Regimes vilify demonstrators in order to legitimize repressive action; demonstrators, on the other hand, use framing strategies to create resonance and legitimacy for their goals and to mobilize potential sympathisers. Yet the link between how actions are perceived and interpreted, and the material reaction to those actions remains understudied. In order to fill this conceptual gap, I propose to investigate the meaning that people attach to specific events as key for understanding mobilization dynamics in the context of authoritarian contraction.

I argue that the success of protest in mobilizing, and of protest policing in suppressing dissent, depends equally on their material characteristics and their discursive representation.

Considering the case of Egypt, I investigate

- how collective actions and state responses to mobilization are interpreted in public discourse,
- how rival interpretations resonate with sentiments and perceptions prevalent in Egyptian society, and
- how they influence both its course of action, and the regime's approach to popular dissent.

In addition, I explore how protesters' identities and their means of expression are transformed in the interaction with a repressive regime, and with the wider Egyptian public, and

- if the perceptions of events in a historical sequence are reproduced in collective action frames, and thus contribute to the formation of collective identities.



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I hold that contested frames are crucial in order to account for variances in the reaction of social movements to regime action, of potentially mobilizable publics to both protest and repression, and of regime actors to social mobilization. Frames are to be understood as competing narratives about historical events and the way dissent is portrayed by regime agents and activists. They work as translation mechanisms between the material events on the ground and the subsequent choices of actors.

Contentious dynamics in Egypt

The Egyptian transformation after the fall of the Mubarak regime takes centre stage in my research. It offers an illustrative example of the rapidly shifting dynamics of contention, with several overlapping protest cycles and mobilizing forces from different camps. Despite unseen physical repression and restriction of the public space, mobilization efforts have anything but ceased. In certain sectors of Egyptian society, mobilization has reached a certain degree of consistency and resilience: Muslim Brotherhood supporters are still demonstrating regularly (even if less frequently and on a smaller scale), labour strikes are abundant, student protests give rise to innovative contentious performances; and armed groups whose use of political violence lies at the extreme end of social movements' contentious repertoires maintain their presence in Egypt.

By tracing protest dynamics since the events in Tahrir Square, and aided by a database that documents scope, repertoire, and frames for the unfolding events, I ultimately hope to shed light on questions of how protesters' identities evolve alongside tactics, and why such evolutionary processes succeed or fail in generating public support.