

The Egyptian Revolution of 2011: Mechanisms of Violence and Non-Violence

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This talk may be given in English or in German. In case a German version of the abstract is required, please let us know.

Our contribution aims at providing a general account of which factors and mechanisms are of key importance in promoting or containing, respectively, violence in revolutionary situations. In order to establish and expand this knowledge, it has been recommended to proceed “by adding items to or improving upon items already present in the toolbox of possible causal mechanisms.” (Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010) As a point of departure for developing such a general account, we will focus not only on existing historical comparative analyses but also on practical recommendations that have been given in order to minimize violence in revolutions (see, e.g., Sharp, 1993/2011).

In this context we would like to analyze and discuss (a) the relevance of the “civilizational hexagon” and its components (see, e.g., Senghaas, 1995, 2008) for conflict resolution in authoritarian regimes, (b) in how far implementations of approaches of civil conflict management and social defense may be identified (see, e.g., Albrecht, 2003; Ebert, 1997; Johansen, 2004; Müller & Schweitzer, 2000; Quack, 2010; Steinweg, 2008; Truger, 2001), (c) the extent to which Sharp’s theories might have effects on the debate on peace education (see, e.g., Wintersteiner, 2008, 2011), and (d) whether there are parallels to other forms of “successful peaceful conflict resolution” (Matthies, 1997).

Hence, we propose to analyze and reconstruct the key mechanisms and causal factors having influenced the preparation, development, unfolding, and outcome of the Egyptian revolution culminating in the mass uprisings having started on 25 Jan 2011. We will identify both mechanisms of a certain generality (e.g., the dynamics connecting social topology, mosque attendance and protest marches on Fridays) and those that are unique for the Egyptian situation (e.g., the Egyptian population’s exceeding trust in the military)

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The Egyptian Revolution came about within the general context of Arab authoritarian rule. Egypt's political system and social structures, like many in the Arab world, have widely been described as authoritarian or neo-patrimonial (Weber, 1921/1972; on the challenge of Arab authoritarianism for democratization policy see Brumberg, 2002; Jung, 2006; Asseburg & Koepf, 2007; Mattes, 2008; Bicchi, 2009; Youngs, 2006; Zaki, 2008). Central structural features of these systems are: informal influence, bargaining and strong leaders (Pawelka, 1985). Together with the societal organization along family and patriarchal social structures, this forms systems of high concentration of political power. In concrete terms, the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak as the strong leader figure (Lesch, 1989) was surrounded by a number of competing elite groups, like military, police and businessmen, who received different forms of privileges directly and informally by the ruler (such as monopolies, loans, land deals or direct funding). At the same time, the distance between citizens and elite was assured and kept up by strict control, and complex and hierarchical bureaucracies (Kreitmeyr & Schlumberger, 2010, pp. 17 sqq.).

The logic of persistence of these systems was the suppression of alternative political movements or oppositions. This included a lack of democracy with conditions diverging intolerably from the European ideas of participative democracy, rule of law and protection of human rights (see Council of the European Union, 2008; Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, 2009; U. S. Department of State, 2009; Amnesty International, EU Office, 2006).

The special case of the Egyptian revolution features a combination of growing power as well as accumulation of wealth in the hands of an ever smaller politico-economic elite with no distributional effect on the poor, an increasing alienation between the instruments of domestic security and the supply of security for the population by erratic practices of police violence and torture. Mubarak's miscalculations concerning the strengths of the ties of loyalty to the population – considerably weakened by the vote-rigging during the 2010 elections – and to the military in effect led to his rapid loss of power (for a more comprehensive discussion of causes for the revolution see Lesch, 2011).

This phenomenological description of the Egyptian revolution lacks a substantial grounding on what social mechanisms exactly were at work. The concept of mechanism, in particular, causal mechanism, is increasingly perceived as a useful and appropriate instrument for analyzing, explaining, predicting, and influencing the processes occurring in social systems (see Bunge, 1997; Mayntz, 2004). Instead of pursuing either purely statistical, e.g., correlational data on one hand (see Mahoney, 2001) or searching for universal laws roughly analogous to the laws of physics on the other (see Little, 1993), the mechanistic approach proposes to offer a toolbox of transferrable building blocks in various different social systems which are generalizable.

The mechanistic approach aims at avoiding the limitations of both methodological individualism and the associated rational choice premiss and holism (with respect to social systems) in order to focus on the working of mechanisms on the meso- or macro-level, or situational context which in an interplay with individual actions shapes the outcome of a social process. In particular, mechanisms provide the framework to credibly explain events based on the causal relations between an ensemble of individual actions plus their environment, or context (see Gangl, 2010; Hedström & Ylikoski, 2010; Falletti & Lynch, 2009).

Most importantly, however, we will attempt an explanation as to which factors and mechanisms were decisive for the comparatively non-violent course of events in Egypt: Compared with many other uprisings in the Arab Spring, the Egyptian revolution, whatever its ultimate

result will turn out to be, so far has been remarkably non-violent. Therefore, we intend to focus in particular on trying to identify the key mechanisms at work at the turning points of this development, the points where different outcomes – more and less violent ones – were possible, or imaginable. Of course, mechanisms may be regular, repeatable, and law-like, but also “ephemeral and capricious” (Glennan, 2010; for one specific case study of revolution see Beissinger, 2011). What we intend to show is that even in a single historical event such as a revolution, a sufficiently interesting number of portable mechanisms may not only be identified but also contribute significantly to a credible explanation, or reconstruction.

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