

Preference Falsification, Revolutionary Coordination, and The Tahrir Square Model

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1. Introduction

Eighteen days of sustained protests in Cairo's Tahrir Square in early 2011 brought down Hosni Mubarak, ruler of Egypt for over 29 years. The speed with which protests grew during that time surprised many participants and observers. Egyptians had been protesting by the thousands – occasionally, by the tens of thousands – for over a decade. Yet, few analysts thought that public protests could grow to the point where they could bring down the regime. One study documented over two million Egyptian workers participating in 3,239 strikes, gatherings, sit-ins, and demonstrations from 2004-2010 (Beinin 2010, 2011). And those numbers reflect only workplace mobilizations. Political parties, associations (e.g., the Society of Muslim Brothers), youth movements (e.g., Kefaya or the April 6 Youth Movement), and residential-based groups held thousands of similar events over that period. But these groups often were divided among themselves and drew from different social bases. The overthrow of President Ben Ali in Tunisia certainly inspired many Egyptians, but what was sufficiently different in Egypt in January 2011 that these disparate groups could coordinate their efforts and attract the support of large numbers of Egyptians who had never before protested against the regime?

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In this essay, I build upon Timur Kuran's work on unforeseen political revolutions to help make sense of the stability (and fragility) of the status quo that existed in Egypt. By relaxing a few assumptions of Kuran's model, I am able to show that a key innovation in January 2011 was that Egyptians fortuitously stumbled upon a particular way and place to protest that made it easy for them to see how many others had joined the opposition. A series of events on January 25th created incentives for Egyptian opposition groups to focus their subsequent efforts on one place – Tahrir Square. Committed activists seized Tahrir three days later and continuously occupied the space until Mubarak stepped down. Relative moderates joined and reinforced them on days that were named and highly organized. One protester's sign succinctly summarized the strategy, "Mubarak, you go away. I go home. The end."

This modality of protest, which I call "The Tahrir Square Model," was particularly powerful in growing the size of the opposition because it helped Egyptians determine how many other Egyptians had joined the opposition to Mubarak's regime. It generated common knowledge about the size of the opposition and helped induce what Kuran calls a revolutionary bandwagon. Until the opposition stumbled into Tahrir, Egyptians had been unable to collectively estimate the size of the opposition, a critical parameter in his framework. After opposition groups coordinated their efforts in that one well-known space, Egyptians could monitor the size of the crowds over time by watching al-Jazeera and by visiting Tahrir or hearing reports from friends and family who had visited.

After Mubarak was forced from office, activists in other Arab countries mimicked the "Tahrir Square Model" as best they could. In my research, I find that protests spread and grew only in countries that had an analogous central focal square. The transnational diffusion of this specific innovation facilitated collective mobilization in some countries (those with a specific feature in the urban built environment) but hindered it in others. It shaped how and where the so-called "Arab Spring" spread.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 briefly introduces Kuran's dual preference model before relaxing a few key assumptions about what people know. Section 3 examines the Tahrir Square model and uses details of the Egyptian uprising to illustrate the usefulness of the deductive approach. Section 4 discusses the spread of that model beyond Egypt. Section 5 concludes.

2. Preference Falsification and political revolution

One of Timur Kuran's research programs focuses on the repercussions of hidden preferences. His dual preference model distinguishes between an individual's private preference and her public preference. The former is what she would express in the absence of social pressures or anticipated punishment; the latter is what she chooses to convey. Kuran defines "preference falsification" as choosing a public preference different from one's private preference, and he then uses the concept to explore the unintended consequences of such behavior in a wide variety of strategic settings.

Most influentially, Kuran applied this deductive perspective to the study of political revolutions and, in particular, explaining why such events often surprise both observers and participants (Kuran 1991; 1995, p. 247-260). Imagine a society where some public opposition to the ruling regime exists. Activists are willing to challenge the regime, despite considerable personal risk and little hope of success, but they are too few in number to overthrow it and need others to join them. Now imagine that some remainder of the rest of society would join this opposition if enough others also did. These individuals vary in their motivations and the conditions under which they would join the opposition; they have different private preferences. Some would join the opposition if only a few others did as well; perhaps they need 20% of society to be in public opposition for them to join. Others would only join if large portions of society, maybe 50%, had already "defected" to the opposition. A presumably small portion of society would never defect from the regime; Donald Rumsfeld famously blamed insurgent attacks in Iraq on "pockets of dead-enders." Each individual has a "revolutionary threshold" – the critical value of public opposition at which an individual will abandon the government and join that opposition – and these unobservable thresholds vary throughout society.

People do not know the distribution of these revolutionary thresholds within their society. The distribution might be one in which a small change in the number of people in opposition would lead to a series of self-augmenting defections whereby each move to the opposition triggers more defections. Such a society is on the pinnacle of revolution without anyone fully realizing it because a change in the private preference of a small number of people would trigger a revolutionary bandwagon. Kuran would say that such a status quo owes its stability to preference falsification. Or, the distribution of thresholds could be such that even a large number of people joining the opposition at once would be insufficient to reach the revolutionary threshold needed to trigger yet more defections.

Changes in an individual's private preferences can change their revolutionary threshold. Kuran give an example of someone who has an unpleasant encounter at a government ministry, and this new (and exogenous) alienation from the regime deepens (i.e., changes her private preference in a way that reduces her revolutionary threshold) to the point where she tosses an egg at the country's leader during an official rally (i.e., she changes her behavior to bring her public preference in line with her new private preference – she is now in opposition) (Kuran 1995, p. 250). He then analyses how the impact of this defection varies according to different distributions of thresholds in society.

Kuran's basic model, however, does not consider how people know how many other people oppose the regime. The size of the opposition in a society at any moment is assumed to be common knowledge, that is, everyone knows it, everyone knows that everyone knows it, and everyone knows that everyone knows that everyone knows it, etc. (Chwe 2001). In the example given, a few citizens might witness the egg-tossing and tell others about it. But, first, how do people who hear about it secondhand know that the rumor is true and not misinformation or an exaggeration by those already in opposition? Kuran mentions that revolutionary leaders have incentives to publicize hidden discontent but they also have incentives to exaggerate the breadth and depth of that discontent, and others in society know this. Second, how do people know that the egg-tosser is a new defector and not someone who had long been in opposition? How do people know that the number in opposition has increased? More fundamentally, how do people know how many other people already oppose the regime? Regimes, particularly authoritarian ones, have incentives and capabilities to prevent people from accurately learning the size of actual opposition. I argue that the way Egyptians came to protest in Tahrir Square solved these informational challenges.

2. The Tahrir Square model

3.1 A divided opposition

Protests had become common in Egypt in the 2000s; it was sometimes rare to go a week without seeing or hearing about a demonstration, perhaps by journalists or a group of neighbors. Joel Beinin (2010, p. 14) described the worker protest wave since 2004 as “the largest social movement Egypt has witnessed in more than half a century,” and a state-owned newspaper, Ruz al-Yusuf, declared 2007 “The Year of the Sit-in” (El-Ghobashy 2011b, p. 40). Labor demonstrations were only one form of protest occurring in Egypt. Mona El-Ghobashy (2011a,

p. 3-4; 2011b) categorizes protests in Egypt in three distinct currents: 1) labor – workplace protests by industrial laborers, civil servants, and trade practitioners; 2) popular – protests by neighborhood or town residents, including those by Copts, Sinai Bedouins, and farmers; and 3) professional or associational – protests by professional associations, social movements, and political parties. The latter category includes grassroots movements, such as the Egyptian Movement for Change (also known as Kifaya, or Enough), The Society of Muslim Brothers, and, since 2008, the April 6 Youth Movement and online organizers of networks of tech-savvy youth. “For at least a decade before Mubarak’s ouster,” El-Ghobashy writes (2011b, p. 39.), “Egyptians were doing their politics outdoors.”

These groups had diverse agendas and interests. They drew from distinct social bases and tended to mobilize in different places and in different ways. Coordination among them was often difficult. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 built upon more than 10 years of mobilization by these groups, but Egyptians on January 25th did not know three things: 1) how many other Egyptians already opposed the regime, 2) how many other Egyptians thought already opposed the regime, and 3) the circumstances under which many others would join the opposition. The fortuitous coordination of protests on Tahrir Square on January 25th-28th solved these informational problems.

3.2 Tahrir Square and coordination

The history of Egypt’s most recent revolution is still being written, but, based on available evidence and participants’ accounts, it appears that the strategy of continuously occupying Tahrir Square was not deliberate or planned. Prior to and on January 25th, small to medium-sized protests occurred throughout Cairo. Although Tahrir Square had been the site of previous protests on occasion, such as the 1977 bread riots and demonstrations in March 2003 against the U.S. bombing of Baghdad, it was not a preeminent site of protest. Other sites were more prominent protest venues, and Tahrir had never lived up to its billing as “Liberation” Square.¹

More commonly, protesters moved around, hoping to link up with other groups or attract additional participants. Different groups – trade unions, fan clubs of soccer teams, Kifaya, the Wafd and Ghad parties, neighbors – organized

¹ Tahrir Square is approximately 140 years old and sits on the site of a former British military barracks. Initially named Ismailia Square, it was officially renamed Tahrir Square in 1955 to commemorate the 1952 revolution.

these protests. There are conflicting accounts of who organized what on the “Day of Anger” on January 25th, but accounts agree that organizers changed the start time and locations of planned protests to mislead security forces. Protesters started off in small groups from different locations inside neighborhoods or outside mosques and converged at key intersections to move together to various locations. Multiple accounts relate that sometime in the afternoon a small group of protesters in Tahrir Square clashed with riot police and, hearing of this, numerous protesters flocked there in support.

Participants’ accounts reflect the contingent nature of the decision to occupy Tahrir Square. Ashraf Khalil (2012, p. 148-49) describes, “Just before 4:00 P.M. just as the police were potentially starting to turn the tide [in Tahrir Square], a thousand-strong march rushed in from the direction of Abdin with a huge roar, adding fresh numbers and momentum to the protesters.” He continues, quoting a participant who is also a blogger, “As evening approached, ‘The discussion became, ‘Do we stay or not?’ People were saying, ‘If we leave, we’ll never take the square again.’ Then people started getting blankets and food,” said Mohamed El Dahshan. Fresh bodies began flocking to the square, having heard the news of its occupation by protesters.” Police violently removed protesters from Tahrir Square that night, but something had changed.

The occupation of Tahrir Square solved a tacit coordination problem for Egyptian opposition groups of where and how to demonstrate for change. Opposition groups, who were deeply divided by agendas and interests, realized on January 26th that the previous day’s clashes and failed attempt to hold Tahrir Square had given the space a focal quality. They knew that Egyptians would now expect other Egyptians wanting to protest to go there. Because no group or political current could credibly claim to have organized the initial occupation of Tahrir, no group “owned” the space. In contrast, opposition groups knew that if they wanted to be part of what was occurring, Tahrir is where they had to try to be. Several called – some independently, some in a coordinated manner – for massive “Friday of Anger” protests on the following Friday, January 28th, to converge and retake Tahrir Square.

The remaining timeline of events is well-documented. The regime also knew that Tahrir had acquired a focal quality and tried to prevent the anticipated popular takeover of the square. On January 26th, downtown businesses were instructed to close before 1 pm, Metro lines did not stop at Tahrir Square’s Sadat Station, nearby Metro stations were partially blocked, and thousands of police and Interior

Ministry forces were deployed at numerous checkpoints in the area (El-Ghobashy 2011, p. 9). On the night of January 27th, Egypt's Internet and cellular phone services went dead; roads into Cairo were closed and the city was locked down; and major roads leading into Tahrir Square were blocked. Yet, on January 28th, protesters, now joined by opposition groups that had not participated as organizations on January 25th – such as the Tagammu leftists, Nasserists, and the Muslim Brothers – forced their way across the Qasr al-Nil bridge and down other arteries into Tahrir Square. Protesters occupied Tahrir continuously until Mubarak was forced to relinquish power two weeks later.

3.2 Seeing public opposition

Why was the occupation of Tahrir Square so effective at overcoming constraints on collective action and growing the size of the opposition? The continuous occupation of Tahrir Square made it easier for Egyptians to see (and know that others saw) how many other Egyptians had defected from the regime; it made this information common knowledge (Chwe 2001). Media outlets and bloggers reported directly from Tahrir, and several Arab satellite stations aired almost constant feeds. Al-Jazeera, in particular, covered the occupation of the square with enthusiasm and a framing that, in the eyes of many, made the station an actor in the event.

Cairenes knew Tahrir Square's size and location, which helped them to estimate the relative size of crowds there. They could tell if the number of protesters was increasing, and they knew that others could as well. It made the size and nature of the opposition visible; it also made it more difficult for revolutionary entrepreneurs to exaggerate or the regime to minimize the size of the opposition. Once public opposition became visible, citizens found it easier to decide if they wanted to join (i.e., if their revolutionary threshold had been met). The layout and accessibility of Tahrir Square also made it easy for Egyptians to visit and report back to friends and family members with pictures taken with camera phones and accounts of who was there and what was being said. Two metro lines meet at Sadat station, and 23 streets lead to different parts of Tahrir Square (which is not really a square, but a vaguely-defined space that encompasses about 5-6 adjoining open areas). It is a difficult space for security forces to encircle or isolate. Finally, the atmosphere in Tahrir Square, at least on some days, was festive and exciting. The constant presence of the media, particularly al-Jazeera, in the square provided a sense of protection. As time went on, people could go and see for themselves what was occurring without fully committing to becoming part of the opposition.

The continuous aspect of the protest/occupation made it easy for those not previously part of an opposition group to see how many others were now opposed to the regime. This facilitated the revolutionary bandwagon that occurred over the subsequent two weeks. Many participants claim it was their first time participating in a demonstration. A 68-year old Egyptian describes his attitude at the time, “When the demonstrations started [in January], I thought it was just one more demonstration that would be dispersed by the police as usual. But as time went on, there was a persistence that we had not seen before. I started believing it may go all the way” (Rusdhy 2011, p. 181). A 45-year old businessman recalled, “When the recent demonstrations started, I figured these were a bunch of kids with some signs and banners, dreaming of democracy, so I didn’t pay much attention. . . . And I knew from previous demonstrations how the scenario would unfold: the youth would go out to demonstrate, they might get violent; then one shot would be fired, one youngster would die, and the whole thing would be over. But that did not happen this time! This time was the exact opposite of what usually happens. . . . When the demonstrations continued, I asked myself if I supported them. I have the same frustrations as the kids on the street. I know people might think I have an easy life, but they don’t realize how hard people like me have to work to live the way we do, and the pressures we face” (Rushdy, p. 192-193). Youth groups and social movements were among the committed activists in Tahrir Square from the beginning. After two weeks, on February 9th and 10th, blue-collar workers and civil servants joined the protesters in large numbers (El-Ghobashy 2011b, p. 42). Mubarak was removed from power the following day.

4. *Transnational diffusion*

Although the Arab Uprisings began in Tunisia, it was the Egyptian occupation of Tahrir Square that made it a clear case of a cross-national wave of popular mobilization to authoritarian regimes (Patel, Bunce, and Wolchick forthcoming). The toppling of Mubarak demonstrated to others that the precedent could travel and succeed in a country that was larger, more similar to others in the region, and closely allied with the U.S. (Patel and Bunce 2012). My current research examines variation in the subsequent transnational diffusion: why did the Egyptian example of how to sustain and grow protest spread to some Arab countries but not others in the weeks following Mubarak’s departure from office? Leaders in Libya and Yemen were also soon forced from power after ruling for 42 and 33 years, respectively. Revolutionary bandwagons began in Bahrain and Syria. But,

in Jordan, Oman, Algeria, Iraq, and elsewhere, protests either never got off the ground or failed to grow. Should we – and, more importantly, citizens in those countries – infer that they have a distribution of revolutionary thresholds insufficient for a bandwagon process? My revision of Kuran’s framework, which focuses on the challenges of identifying the size of the extant public opposition, suggests that the Arab Uprisings are not necessarily finished. The transnational spread of the Tahrir Square Model facilitated similar mobilizations in some countries but hindered it in others. I find that the urban built environment of capital cities is the key determinant of where the Egyptian precedent took root.

Inspired by events in Tunisia, protests of some sort occurred or were planned in almost all Arab countries. But, after the fall of Mubarak in Egypt, protesters elsewhere had a specific protest model to mimic – the Tahrir Square Model. I hypothesize that in countries where the capital city has a single square or public space that the public would collectively imagine as a domestic parallel to Tahrir Square, the Egyptian example should have bit more deeply because citizens would know where and how other citizens would apply that example (Patel 2012). Protests should have been more likely to occur and expand in these countries as revolutionary entrepreneurs seized their focal squares or remained collectively mobilized after being forced out of them by the regime. In countries where the capital city lacks such a focal space, however, citizens would not know where and how other citizens would apply the Egyptian model. In these cases, I expect protests to either not get off the ground or to remain sporadic in both time and space as uncoordinated opposition groups try to apply the model in various ways and places. I identified the countries in which latent focal squares existed and found that countries with them had a higher propensity for mobilization than those that did not. Sustained mobilization occurred and grew in four of the six countries that possess such a square; no bandwagon mobilizations occurred in any of the ten polities that lack a latent focal square. These findings offer an alternative and original explanation for why Arab republics have been more susceptible to protests or “contagion” than the region’s monarchies during this wave of popular protest. Republics and monarchies have different spatial layouts. Republics that were once monarchies often have large public squares that were built to commemorate the overthrow of the monarchical regime. Those spaces became focal protest squares during the Arab Uprisings. My theory can also account for variation among republics and among monarchies in their susceptibility to protest in the months immediately after Mubarak left office.

5. Conclusion

Until the Arab Uprisings began in late 2010 and early 2011, the authoritarian regimes of the Arab Middle East had been remarkable stable since the early 1970s. Most of the region's rulers came to power decades ago or are a relative or appointed successor of their predecessor. They survived wild fluctuations in the oil market and the end of the Cold War, and a brief period of relative "liberalization" in the early 1990s. Explaining the robustness of both authoritarians and authoritarianism has been the central preoccupation of many scholars of the region over the past fifteen years, and scholars have debated the explanatory power of factors such as culture, the region's vast oil and gas rents, and international support for ruling regimes (Bellin 2004). Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, however, regional scholars have rediscovered the work of Timur Kuran, and many of us are building upon his framework to examine the micro-foundations of participation and non-participation in popular uprisings. The Arab Uprisings have changed the Middle East. Publics are mobilized and openly challenge regimes' coercive apparatuses. Kuran's work is already providing a deductive foundation to understand the consequences of these changes and the nature and causes of wealth and well-being in the least democratic region of the world.

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