

The Egyptian Uprising of 2011

TRACING THE ROLE OF THE CAIRO-BASED POLITICAL OPPOSITION

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Abstract

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It is the aim of this study to understand the mobilization process leading up to and the diffusion of collective contentious behavior during the Egyptian Uprising of 2011. Using process tracing and focusing on the role of the so-called Cairo-based political opposition, this study contributes to debates on social movement theory and contentious politics by elaborating on the causal mechanisms that facilitate mobilization and diffusion processes in periods of heightened social conflict. As one of its main contributions, the study strongly suggests a need to pay more attention to the complexity and contingent nature of such large-scale protest episodes. Additionally, the study shows a comparatively higher relative importance of rather short-term changes in the perceptions of political opportunities as opposed to the more stable objective structure of political opportunities as a determinant of collective contentious behavior.

Empirically, this in-depth single case study draws upon a number of different types of data. It builds, most importantly, on semi-structured interviews with activists, employees of nongovernmental organizations in the human rights sector, journalists, and scholars. Most interviews were conducted in Egypt between late 2014 and 2015. The study reveals that groups and social movement organizations within what some call the pro-democracy movement, for the better part of a decade, had tried to mobilize for socio-political change albeit rather unsuccessfully. This means that they mostly succeeded in mobilizing rather small numbers of predominantly well-educated middle-class followers during repeated contentious interactions with the regime of President Hosni Mubarak. Despite these apparent failures to achieve movement objectives, there was a gradual opening of structural political opportunities, and activists managed to assemble new mobilizing structures and resources.

The initial protest events on January 25, 2011, which marked the beginning of the eighteen-day uprising were planned and coordinated by a coalition of movement organizations within the Cairo-based political opposition. The almost unprecedented protest participation during these events surprised even the organizers. This coalition of early risers, however, is just part of the explanation, which also includes factors like rapidly changing perceptions of political opportunities and threats due to events like the successful uprising in Tunisia.

In short, the size and scope of the uprising were the result of the complex interplay of actors and structures in a context characterized by high degrees of contingency.

Keywords: Arab Spring; Egypt; Egyptian revolution; contentious politics; diffusion; Middle East and North Africa; mobilization; social movements; social movement theory