

Engaging Other Players

The Egyptian Revolution

No one expected Egypt's uprising in January 2011. There had been disgust, frustration, and resignation over Mubarak's cronyist regime for decades, and efforts to mobilize around two grisly killings by Alexandria's police in 2010 had failed despite the extensive use of Facebook. People were shocked but remained cynical – although millions soon embraced Khaled Said, one of the Alexandria victims, as a symbol of regime violence. The Facebook group “We are all Khaled Said” grew to half a million members.

Then a fruit vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia in December 2010, and after a month of protests – on January 14 – Tunisia's dictator panicked and fled the country. Suddenly, there was hope in Egypt to go along with the indignation, a moral battery. What could happen in Tunisia could happen in Egypt.

Demonstrations against police brutality, held mischievously on National Police Day, January 25, 2011, drew tens of thousands of Cairo protestors, who managed to coordinate their marches partly via cellphones and social media. At first they demanded term limits on the president, not his resignation. Several days later, the government shut down cellphone and internet access for most Egyptians, but old-fashioned face-to-face networks plugged the gap: the 28th was a Friday, when mosques filled with the faithful.

Buoyed by the feeling of solidarity that religious rituals provide, by the feeling that God was on their side, hundreds of thousands took to the streets after prayers. Two anxious weeks followed: some concessions from Mubarak, attacks on demonstrators by armed thugs, and the army's crucial decision not to intervene. Protest against police violence, met with brutal intransigence, escalated into demands for the regime's end. A protest movement developed into a revolutionary movement.

The giant tent camp in Tahrir Square grew steadily. Despite the dangers, people were on holiday, hopeful of big changes and thus in a good mood, another joyous bivouac. Each victory, small or large, amplified the emotional energy of that mood. Tahrir was a sea of signs, mostly urging Mubarak to go ("I wash my hands of you until the day of judgment") or simply expressing feelings ("People hate you"). Some apologized for not acting sooner ("Forgive me Lord, I was afraid and silent"). A group of four brothers, whose two other brothers had been killed, strikingly taped their mouths shut ("No talk until he leaves") (Khalil 2011).

With Tahrir's exhilaration as background, each attack – verbal or physical – by Mubarak's thugs and spokespersons created more indignation than fear. Or rather, indignation was a good way to transform the negative mood of anxiety into a positive mood. Tahrir Square became a carnival, a moment of madness, a kind of dream. Throughout the city people talked with their neighbors, formed neighborhood watches, helped strangers who had been tear-gassed. The outrage peaked on February 10, when Mubarak went on television and – instead of the expected resignation – gave a meandering but defiant speech. The next day, another Friday, the crowds swelled enormously. Mubarak resigned that evening.

The overthrow of a dictator is the end of one story but the beginning of another, a shift from the arena of the street to many others, often hidden from view. Most revolutions bring together a broad coalition that shares only its indignation against the old regime (one no, many yeses, to borrow from the global justice movement), but once that lightning rod for hatred and defiance is removed, then the coalition splits into its component, and competing, players.

A military council took power after Mubarak's resignation, pledging to step down after a constitutional referendum and elections. Protests continued over some of the Supreme Council's decisions, and groups broke into the offices of the secret police to search their files, unsurprisingly turning up evidence of mass surveillance under Mubarak. After the new constitution was

approved, the council proved willing to detain and prosecute former Mubarak officials, but it also imposed heavy fines for protest activities, thereby inspiring more protest. For months, protestors returned to the streets, especially on Fridays, with numbers in the hundreds of thousands. They often clashed with police, and dozens were killed.

In November 2011, with protests growing, the Council apologized for the deaths of protestors and appointed a civilian prime minister, partly because of pressure by the US government. In April 2012, after parliamentary, but before presidential, elections, a high administrative court entered the fray, disbanding the new assembly charged with drafting another constitution. In June, Egypt's Supreme Court declared the parliamentary elections invalid, and the armed forces again took control. The revolution faltered.

The Muslim Brotherhood's extensive networks were easily transformed into a political party, and its candidate Mohamed Morsi was elected president on June 24, 2012. Initially, he showed strategic acumen, reinstating the parliament that the courts had annulled and cleverly promoting the two strongest military leaders on the Council to be his personal advisors, removing them (and several others) from the key player, the army.

In November, Morsi took another step, purporting to protect the work of the constitutional assembly but giving himself whatever powers he needed to protect the revolution – his revolution. Protestors returned to the streets, especially secular demonstrators who feared the

Muslim Brotherhood. Morsi may have run afoul of the innovation dilemma, pushing too many changes too fast – but also passing laws that gave him powers far beyond those necessary to protect the revolution. He failed to make alliances with liberal parties, deepening their mistrust rather than redressing it. He began to look too strong, as well as incompetent in managing the economy.

Millions took to the streets on June 30, 2013, with a variety of economic and political grievances but also aiming to enjoy the festival, in what may have been the largest single demonstration ever. They welcomed an army coup that removed Morsi from office on July 3. The army imprisoned hundreds of Brotherhood leaders and excluded the party from any positions in the new government. The Obama administration protested by withholding military jets it had promised, but soon accepted the new situation by refusing to condemn it as a coup. In several incidents, hundreds of pro-Brotherhood demonstrators were injured and killed.

Egypt's revolution unfolded over several years, a contest among parties, politicians, the army, high judges, unions, and between Islamist and non-Islamist protest movements (once revolutionary allies). In new and old arenas, players struggled for power, including the power to shape the arenas. As a spokesman for the Brotherhood said in June 2012: "It is a chessboard. They made a move and we made a move." And many more moves. By the start of 2014, however, the army had tightened its control, to the extent of declaring the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist group.

A **revolution** is a special kind of outcome, in which a new political regime is established, with changes in the structure of government and not merely – as with normal elections – changes in the parties in power. Many revolutionary movements fail to achieve a revolution. Revolutions are rare, but we study and sometimes admire them because they are so important in world history. The new regimes, especially at first, are usually improvements over what they replace. Because revolutions inspire people, they leave behind moral visions and ideals as well as new government bureaucracies.

The study of revolutions and the study of other social movements have been oddly distant for many years, in part because revolutions are chains of so many distinct phases and processes, involving different sets of players in different phases. But revolutions are exemplary in one way: they show that politics is an interaction among multiple players, spilling across many arenas, over extended periods of time. Specifying those players, arenas, and interactions is key to explaining both protest and revolutions.

Ultimately, protestors want to change the world around them, and their relative success depends on their ability to coerce, persuade, or buy off other players, who may be sympathetic, hostile, or neutral, but all of whom have tactics and goals of their own. We can view them through the same interpretive lens we have used for protest groups: asking what they want, how they see the world, what dilemmas they face, what resources and routines they rely on, who their allies and rivals are.

Only then can we understand how they interact with protestors to produce wins, losses, and other impacts of protest.

The forces of order

Among the many players that form the state, protestors interact most regularly with the *police* and related “forces of order” such as soldiers, paid bullies, riot police, traffic police, spies, and private security services like embassy guards or the Pinkerton Detective Agency. In all nations, police forces monitor and spy on protest groups, sometimes quite extensively. (At the height of the Red Scare in the US in the 1950s, it is estimated, one-third of the members of the Communist Party were FBI agents, who also seem to have been the backbone of the postwar Ku Klux Klan.) In Cairo, hundreds of police were deployed at each of the 20 rallying points advertised on Facebook for January 25, 2011, blocking many marches, and the most successful march started at a site intentionally kept secret and off Facebook.

Police face their own choices of whether to be naughty or nice, and countries differ enormously in how well police treat demonstrations. In the world’s more tolerant nations, protest organizers expect to negotiate a range of issues with the police in advance, such as where they will march, how many will be arrested, and what other activities will be permitted. In less tolerant countries, they expect to be harassed, beaten, arrested, and sometimes killed for their activities.

At one time, police had a free hand everywhere, and torture and execution were common policing tools. Intense pain crowds out

other goals, and any future plans, so that its victim will often do anything to stop it, including revealing secret information about comrades and clandestine activities. The victims with the strongest ideologies and collective identities seem to withstand the pain longer, so deep are their loyalties to others, so strong their sense of purpose.

Short of torture, repressive regimes have other means of intimidation. In Egypt, armored vehicles sped through the streets, sometimes hitting pedestrians; hundreds of officers marched or ran, in a thuggish military cadence, and – most desperately – fired into the crowds that constantly encircled them. Under both Mubarak and Morsi, police sprayed protestors with water cannons, beat them, tear-gassed and sometimes shot them. Most of all, commanders tried to ensure that the police outnumbered protestors at all times, a lesson applied these days in New York as well as in Cairo. When they feel strong, security forces sometimes show a human face, talking with demonstrators, smiling, even singing along. Police turn out to be human, protestors sometimes remark. When they feel threatened, however, the police still resort to violence.

In Cairo in 2011, the numbers shifted in favor of the demonstrators. Instead of massed police surrounding demonstrators, wave upon wave of protestors arrived from various quarters and surrounded the police, who were terrified as they found themselves outnumbered. And rightly so: police cars were stopped and overturned;

officers spraying fire hoses were pulled off their trucks; black riot helmets were flying through the air during brawls. The police may have been bruised but they were not killed, since they, rather than the protestors, were the ones with the guns. In contrast to the police, Egypt's army were in tanks, so they were not likely to feel threatened. This helped them remain calm, waiting for strategic decisions taken by their commanders, who in turn were interacting with other players such as their financial patrons in Washington.

Until the 1970s, police in most western democracies treated most demonstrators in the same way, as criminals who had to be subdued, and they would deploy more and more force until crowds dispersed or were arrested. But the police learned – slowly and incompletely – that brutality tends to make protestors angrier, so that violence escalates. Public attitudes toward demonstrators become more sympathetic, and police usually conformed, especially when cellphone video capacities vastly increased the chances that a brutal act would make the evening news or go viral on the internet. Police became more professional, tolerating more protest activities, negotiating with protest leaders beforehand, preventing trespassing and violence rather than waiting for it, trying to avoid injuries on both sides, and following the laws rather than seeing themselves as above the law (della Porta and Reiter 1998).

But after the Seattle protests in 1999, and especially with the widespread panic following 9/11, police became more aggressive again. They began to fence off

restricted areas, to make preemptive arrests of protest leaders, and to corral demonstrators into restricted, uncomfortable side streets and barricaded pens. Under cover of new antiterrorist legislation, and with increased technological powers, US police forces increased their surveillance of protestors. They did their own far-fetched character work to depict a variety of peaceful protestors as terrorists, dangerous “villains” rather than legitimate political players, against whom they needed vast government funding.

In grappling with the naughty or nice dilemma, police respond in part to the desires of the politicians and bureaucrats who control their budgets. Some politicians wish to look progressive and tolerant of protest. Others want to prove they are tough, and allow the police more leeway in dealing with protest. In those cases police corral demonstrators, deal roughly with them, detain large numbers, and prosecute those arrested. (They also try to influence politicians’ preferences so that they do not interfere with the police.) They are strategic players like any other.

Armies have different goals from those of the police. They are trained in heavy weapons intended to fight wars against other armies, not to put down protest in their own nations, something that most soldiers dislike doing. Some armies contain draftees who may prove sympathetic to dissent, as well. Even with purely professional armies, there is a pronounced distance between the

commanders at the top and the grunts at the bottom, with different perspectives and feelings about the world, so that cleavages can form.

The Egyptian army received billions of dollars in aid, as well as training, from the US, which therefore had some influence over the army's decisions. In contrast to previous presidents, who had supported a long string of nasty dictators around the world, the Obama administration came to support the protestors in Tahrir Square. The army had also grown distant from Mubarak, who, although once a general, had increasingly concentrated on enriching his own family instead of the army. The Egyptian army's choices were crucial to the unfolding outcomes all along.

Because both armies and police sometimes sympathize with moral protest, dictators usually form *special units* of guards or secret police, with extra privileges or ethnic ties to the leader. Their job is to protect the dictator at all costs. They are usually the last to defect in a revolution. Many corrupt regimes also secretly hire *criminals* to perform the nastiest jobs, which professional police or military will not do, a kind of radical flank of individuals who can attack protestors but are not wearing uniforms. The regime can deny any connection, even claiming that these are outraged citizens acting on their own. (In some cases they may actually be citizen vigilantes without ties to the government, but the protestors have an interest in portraying them as paid goons rather than outraged citizens with their own, opposed, moral visions.) There are private police forces too, operating outside most laws. The notorious Pinkerton Detective Agency

employed spies and *agents provocateurs* as well as forming small armies who in many cases fired upon unarmed strikers, doing serious damage to the American labor movement in its early decades. (The agency still exists.)

Both public and private police send spies and provocateurs to disrupt protest organizations in stealthy ways. They try to make group members suspect one another, for instance by sending anonymous letters accusing them of corruption or of spying for the police. They send information and accusations to protestors' employers, or, if they are students, to their schools and universities.

They supply embarrassing information, often fraudulent, to journalists, and try to make different groups wary of each other. They try to make protest groups appear more radical – or just weirder – than they are, like the man at an Occupy rally with a sign saying, “Google: Zionists Control Wall Street.” (Occupiers responded by following him around Zuccotti Park with their own signs saying, “Who pays this guy? He doesn’t speak for me or OWS!”)

Judicial arenas

Arrests place protestors in another set of arenas, the courts. Legal courts are now universal, although with varying degrees of independence from the rest of the state, ranging from being proudly autonomous, as in South Africa, to being abjectly servile, as under most

dictators. Laws are intended to define and enforce the norms of legitimate and illegitimate political action, to embody the meanings and morals of a territorial unit, and so they are constant targets for protestors as well as tools for their opponents.

Some trials become symbols of a cause to broad audiences, who follow the proceedings intently. **Symbolic trials** may arise accidentally, or the government may intend to have show trials to demonstrate the limits of its tolerance. In some cases protestors themselves hope that a large trial will be a new arena through which they can convey their messages to new audiences, or prove their points about the repressive impulses of the state. With class action suits, plaintiffs hope to change policies and awareness, like the *Dukes v. Walmart* suit that proposed to represent no fewer than 1.6 million American women who had worked for the retail behemoth. That is much more than symbolic.

Courtrooms offer moving character dramas by stripping down contestation to a handful of players and attempting to make clear decisions about victims and villains. A protestor who has broken the law: is she a hero, as her comrades believe, or is she a villain, even a common criminal?

Courts contain several official players. In some countries *judges* are thought to preside over (officially) neutral arenas in which prosecutors or plaintiffs battle against defendants, while in other nations judges are an investigating arm of the

state. Upholding the law according to proper procedures is the core professional message that *lawyers* receive in their training, although judges at higher levels also assume responsibility for interpreting the law as well. (All laws are applied through interpretation, in fact, but this is not always admitted.) *Public prosecutors* must decide whether to bring a protestor to trial, torn between their goal of repressing unlawful activities and their fear that the trial will simply bring more publicity and sympathy to the cause.

In common-law systems, *jurors* are another player; they may have greater sympathies for protestors than prosecutors realize, imposing dilemmas on the latter. Juries often refuse to deliver the harsh verdicts that prosecutors request. In recent years British juries have acquitted activists who, claiming “necessity” defenses in the face of immediate threats, had damaged fields of genetically modified crops, the offices of weapons contractors, and coal-fired power plants (Doherty and Hayes 2014).

High courts such as the US Supreme Court are more player than arena in deciding which decisions and policies to review. In Egypt, top courts issued several rulings in spring 2012 that affected the unfolding revolution: they suspended the constitutional assembly in April, struck down a law banning former Mubarak politicians from running for office in June, dissolved the new parliament, and yet also revoked a decree giving military police the power to arrest civilians. Most of these actions blunted the revolution, leading most of the public to see the court as a (reactionary) political player

rather than a neutral arena, but the revocation of the pro-military decree restored a bit of courtly credibility. High court appointees retained some loyalty to Mubarak that rank-and-file lawyers – many of whom joined the 2011 protests – did not share.

Politicians and journalists

Political parties and the *legislators* who belong to them are the ultimate target for many social movements, the source of new laws and policies that can fulfill protestors' goals. Foremost, politicians want to be re-elected, and parties also want to get their members into office and keep them there. Public opinion obviously drives their choices, but they pay special attention to their own supporters (especially financial supporters) and to voters on the margin between two parties, voters whom they might win over with the right policies but lose with the wrong ones.

Policies are not everything, and politicians make more statements than they do laws. Their words matter, and it is often satisfying for a social movement to be taken seriously enough to be acknowledged at all. Like other strategic players, politicians often send different messages to different audiences: a populist, anti-corporate rhetoric may win votes, even while the same politician works behind the scenes to protect corporate interests, making obscure choices that only paid lobbyists notice. But when protestors win a

statement of support they can sometimes transform it into a vote.

Journalists are also key players in contemporary conflicts, we have seen, not only because they shape public opinion but because they also influence the perceptions of protestors and politicians about their *own* situations. Although protestors have their own criticisms of media bias, and large movements have alternative media, movements often turn to mainstream media to assess government intentions and the general mood of the population. Politicians are influenced by journalistic representations of public opinion; they hesitate to get too far out of line on salient issues.

Those who create the news, whether on websites, newspapers, radio, or television, have their own goals and methods. Journalists are usually paid to cover particular beats, typically structured around government arenas like courts or legislatures; they must meet deadlines, and please editors and owners. They try to deliver stories that will attract audiences, which often means stories of individuals, with some suspense, about actions rather than ongoing states of things, and especially novel and photogenic forms of action. Only some protests are deemed “newsworthy” (Gitlin 1980). And only some protestors: while government officials are regularly granted the status of legitimate news sources

to be interviewed, protestors rarely are. They are covered more for their actions than for their opinions, especially actions that threaten to break the law. Editors often

assign protests to the police beat, framing demonstrators as potential lawbreakers.

Protest groups work hard to break this **news barrier**, holding mock interviews with each other, designing slick press releases, inventing soundbites and good visuals. Ironically, journalists often dismiss such activities as inauthentic “press stunts” when protestors appear to be working too hard to attract journalists (Sobieraj 2011). Like all good performances, demonstrations must appear spontaneous; the best acting does not feel like acting. (Sociologist Arlie Hochschild distinguishes *surface acting*, when you put on the right expressions and gestures, from *deep acting*, when you actually feel what you are supposed to be expressing.) It should not appear as if you have practiced your performance.

Despite professional norms embracing objectivity, hard to follow under the best of circumstances, journalists sometimes become more active players. This may be nothing more than helping to bring attention to a social problem through coverage and editorials, usually problems that the middle class can condemn, such as obesity, smoking, or in some cases excessive pay for corporate executives. Sometimes journalists are forced to take sides, especially when government officials or the police attack them for – in the journalists’ eyes – doing their job. Mubarak officials accused foreign journalists of being Israeli agents, and they arrested some Al Jazeera reporters. Pro-Mubarak thugs sacked Al Jazeera’s Cairo office. Al Jazeera returned the favor by pointing out the lies perpetrated by official television, boosting the network’s standing with protestors, who at

one point on February 6, 2011 chanted “Long Live Al Jazeera!”

The internet has decentralized the flow of information across worldwide networks, and people get news from each other as well as from journalists. Regimes still try to control these sources, since there are central nodes in this worldwide network, service providers whose electricity and offices can be shut down. This is not as easy as flipping a switch. The Mubarak regime tried this in the early days of Egypt’s 2011 revolution. First they blocked

text messages. Then they asked the four main internet service providers to disconnect their routers. Two days later they asked another service provider, Noor Data Services, to disconnect, even though transactions on Cairo’s stock exchange were stopped as a result. The blackout was not total, as small providers, especially at universities, continued to operate, and a few Egyptians still had dial-up modems and fax machines they could use (Castells 2012).

Hackers and activists around the world responded to the shutdown by reconfiguring their own systems to channel information to and from Egypt. Twitter quickly developed new procedures to convert voice messages into tweets, and new hash tags to distribute them. Hackers with Telecomix figured out how to convert voice messages to texts and to send them to every fax machine operating in Egypt. Old-fashioned telephone lines substituted for the internet in this and other ways. (The brief internet shutdown cost the Egyptian economy almost \$100 million.)

Potential allies

Intellectuals, including academics, novelists, artists, and others who think and create for a living and have found some public audience for their products, frequently see their exertions as a kind of politics, and they also – like everyone else – on occasion become part of a social movement. When they join a movement, or at least are sympathetic to it, they can concentrate on presenting the movement's hopes and ideology, in contrast to journalists who have many other goals. We saw that books, music, and other creative products can inspire and “certify” a social movement to members themselves as well as to outsiders. A special kind of *organic intellectual* grows from within the movement, crafting the arguments, brochures, and magazines that help a movement articulate its values and debate its tactics. Their audience is usually the movement itself, although they can be drafted as spokespeople for the media and other audiences.

Celebrities are similar to intellectuals in having their own audiences, who follow what they do, say, and wear. They are often drawn to social movements, speaking out about an issue, raising funds through concerts and appearances, and lending their images to advertisements. Even the best-intentioned public intellectuals and celebrities pose the powerful-allies dilemma for a movement (which organic intellectuals do not): they have their own definition of the cause, their own reputations to worry about, and their own passions.

Bystanders are a loose category of people who watch the action in a political arena without participating themselves. Some bystanders have the potential to turn into players, like politicians who have not yet taken a stand on some controversial matter. Other bystanders might have an indirect effect, like individuals moved to write letters to their member of parliament about some particular issue. Politicians tend to track public opinion, and rarely take positions that are highly unpopular, or at least unpopular with their core voters. Even when bystanders are not likely to influence or become players, it is often satisfying to win them over to your cause, since that reassures you that you are on the side of justice. In many cases we imagine what bystanders are thinking and feeling without actually finding out. They are a symbol of broader audiences.

Other protest groups, in the same or related movements, can be competitors, allies, or both at the same time. You may share a goal with them, such as overthrowing Mubarak, but disagree so much over tactics that it is impossible to work together. Or you may compete with them for attention, members, funds, and control over the definition and outcome of the cause. The young, liberal protestors who belonged to “We are all Khaled Said” were in the streets again chanting similar things about Morsi that they had said about Mubarak, doing battle with their former Islamist allies.

The line between bystanders and other protest groups often blurs, and it is good strategy to try to shift that line. In Egypt, many protests included soccer fans, accustomed to moving in crowds and singing their

favorite songs and slogans. Activated by police repression, they gave a festive air to many marches and rallies. But they were also not afraid to mix it up with the police, something they had experience with. Here was bloc recruitment at its best.

When cooperation is possible, *coalitions* allow groups to work together while maintaining their own identities – and always retaining the right to pull out if a coalition moves in a direction antithetical to the group's core identity. Coalitions can be formal or informal, long-lasting or briefly arranged for a specific purpose. Nothing is automatic about alliances: they require extensive persuasion and emotion work, typically on the part of the leaders of the groups involved.

Donors are a special kind of ally, providing useful resources – mostly money, but also advice, offices, places for rallies, and other useful items. *Foundations*, led by the Ford Foundation in the 1960s, have become important sources of seed money for young groups, in many cases ironically using money originally derived from corporate profits to undo some of the harm done by corporate practices. Those who hand out foundation grants have their own moral visions and professional standards, but they must also please their bosses and boards – much like journalists who face their own pressures from above. Most radicals treat the grant officers with suspicion, partly because foundations tend to favor cautious, legal means of action. Regulators might well shut them down if they did not, as elaborate laws govern foundation activities.

International donors pose a special risk, since they have rich-country resources that are very seductive to poor-country protestors, who as a result are often willing to rework their character and identity to fit the donors' preferred ideas about worthy victims (Bob 2005). A year into the Egyptian revolution, the interim government, still dominated by the military, began harassing US-based groups that promoted democratic reforms and participation, perhaps unsure whether expanded participation would suit the military's interests in the long run (probably not).

Protestors want and need different things from different players, crafting their appeals specially for each one. These other players interact with each other at the same time, often to block the actions of social movements. A swarm of different players constantly observe each other, anticipate actions, and craft their own plans of attack. Whether protestors win or lose depends on this buzzing interaction, which spills across diverse arenas.

Arenas of conflict

Varying combinations of these players engage each other in a range of arenas, each with its own rules, positions, and stakes. Protestors promote their goals in several arenas, and often switch between arenas when they see opportunities for progress. They must constantly monitor and interpret what all the players are doing in the relevant (and potentially relevant) arenas. At their most successful, movements actually change the rules of

arenas or accept positions within them, making it easier for them to influence future developments.

In addition to courtrooms and legislative battles, common arenas include: public *demonstrations* intended to influence participants, passers-by, the media, and governments; *elections* whose outcomes protestors hope to influence; *debates* over issues of public concern, which unfold through books, editorials, blogs, and other media; public *hearings* at which representatives of protest groups testify; the *walls* of buildings that protestors cover with graffiti or posters; *media events* such as political conventions, coronations, or inaugurations where protestors can be assured of some attention if they disrupt things. Protestors can also seize factories, or boycott stores, banks, suppliers, or elections – turning almost any activity or place into an arena for contestation.

Legal tactics are open to protestors who wish to remain within the law, participating in institutionalized routines such as writing to politicians, bringing lawsuits, or peacefully gathering in public spaces. In many of these activities, protest looks like any other kind of politics, but when it moves outdoors, into the streets and squares, it becomes a classic social movement. Although these used to be labeled as “non-institutional” politics, because they did not involve parties and parliaments, we have seen that outdoor protest is well institutionalized in some nations. In more repressive regimes, there are – by definition – more restrictions. Initially, Egyptian protestors stood five feet apart, in silence, in order to comply with rules against public gatherings.

An action that is legal in one country may be banned in another, including apparently straightforward activities such as marches and rallies. *Illegal* tactics often challenge the laws that make them illegal, as we saw in the Wilkes agitation in [chapter 1](#). **Civil disobedience** combines coercion and persuasion. Arrests are a token of thoughtful commitment, entailing considerable time, perhaps fines, and the risk of something more serious such as bodily harm, or in some regimes even death. They also make the news.

Other illegal activities may be aimed not at legal questions or persuasion, but at direct harm or retribution against opponents, such as burning down a barn belonging to a nasty landlord or sabotaging a machine in a factory. These entail coercion more than persuasion, and they can harm either property or people.

Arguing for the naughty option of the naughty or nice dilemma, Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1977) famously argued that poor people, facing elaborate laws intended to control them, only advance their rights and interests when they *disrupt* activities that elites value. The most famous example is the sit-down strikes of the 1930s, when workers occupied assembly lines that were vital to producing General Motors automobiles. Workers held the key to GM's revenues and profits, and after six weeks the world's largest corporation recognized the United Auto Workers as the exclusive bargaining agent for its workers. (The workers were demanding only this simple recognition, nothing more.) Riots, strikes, and other types of occupation are also examples of disruption that attract immediate

attention, as do boycotts. For those with few resources, this approach may work best.

In their complementary formulation of the organization dilemma, Piven and Cloward argue that when poor people form organizations, such as unions, to advance their interests, these organizations betray them, because leaders grow more interested in maintaining the organization than in winning victories for its members. Union leaders become fond of their high salaries and travel, begin to play golf with managers, and to see the union's size and strength as their primary concern. Piven and Cloward downplay the other horn of the dilemma: organizations sometimes provide benefits. (If organizations were always bad, there would be no dilemma, and we might wonder why activists were ever fooled into establishing them.)

Even the most oppressed groups, most of the time, avoid pitched confrontations. So what helps them decide to put down the tools of the status quo and to disrupt things instead? In a word, emotions. Anger and indignation must reach a point where people are willing to take great risks for the common good. Often, a moral shock propels them to higher levels of activity and confrontation. This is not an automatic reaction; leaders must use the shock to reinforce existing loyalties and moral emotions, to instill a sense of urgency – it is now or never – and to raise the priority of these demands far above everyday concerns. When the Egyptian police attacked demonstrators, this was interpreted against a background of hope for change, a sense that a historical turning point had arrived. Crowds swelled rather than dissipating.

Crowds can coerce others, intimidating them with numbers and emotions. They can crowd in and stop a vote or, as happened in Florida in 2000, a vote recount. They can block access. They can distract officials and grab important documents, as a Chinese crowd did in 2002, stealing a document they believed proved local government corruption (O'Brien and Li 2006: 86). Sheer numbers have coercive power. After all, if persuasion were the only mechanism, one person could argue the case more cogently than a thousand. Crowds are threats and shows of force even when they do not coerce anyone. Police recognize this, and are intimidated; that is why they so often respond in kind, with their own crowds of officers.

Although in the long run they hope to change others' values, in the short run protestors occasionally want to paralyze or frighten other players through threats. This remains truer for rightwing or religious movements, like the anti-abortion movement in the US, which has tried to alarm abortion doctors into closing their clinics (with remarkable success: 87 percent of US counties have no abortion provider). Most movements of the left adhere to internal democracy and external persuasion as basic values. But there are still cases, like the Egyptian revolution, when protestors fight back. The naughty or nice dilemma persists.

The world's nastiest regimes are often impervious to persuasion, and desperation leads to sabotage and warfare. Nelson Mandela, head of the African National Congress and a global hero for his decades-long struggle against

apartheid in South Africa, was the co-founder and head of the ANC's guerrilla force, Umkhonto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation). This group, founded in 1961, began by blowing up government facilities and infrastructure. But the Afrikaner regime's intransigence eventually led them from sabotage to attacks on civilians in the 1980s: almost weekly assaults on restaurants, amusement parks, crowded city streets, as well as military installations and fuel depots. Black townships became violently ungoverned, generating appalling images on the international news. Only then did global banks begin to withhold their business loans; only then did the regime begin to negotiate with Mandela, releasing him in 1990. Sometimes, only dirty hands can bring success.

Protestors always have several arenas to choose from, and these pose dilemmas. Should they attend to building their internal networks and solidarities, or should they engage opponents, in the Janus dilemma? Should they adopt disruptive, disreputable tactics that involve higher risks, or stick to familiar, legal tactics, in naughty or nice? Facebook groups, friends, and likes do not bring down corrupt regimes; occupying central squares and scaring off the police do. But nice tactics can do other things, like reconfigure a group's reputation.

There is also a **basket dilemma**: should you concentrate all your time and attention in one promising arena, or carry out activities in several arenas? For instance, should you pursue media attention, but also work behind the scenes to negotiate with sympathetic politicians? Should you boycott an election (as Morsi's opponents

did in April 2013), but also bring lawsuits to try to stop or delay it? Small protest groups must often concentrate on one tactic, while larger ones have more options.

Boycotting an election raises a more general strategic dilemma that I call “**Being There**”: you can try to make an arena seem illegitimate by refusing to participate in it, but you also prevent yourself from having much impact on what goes on inside the arena. This is another dilemma involving risk: a boycott is a gamble that, by not participating, you can destroy the credibility or influence of that

arena. If you do not, you must watch the results from the outside, and it is sometimes hard to get back into the arena.

Arena switching is most common when a player has been altogether blocked in one arena, but it also occurs when players calculate that their chances are better in some other setting. You lose a lawsuit and decide that the courts were not a neutral arena but a player with its own, contrary interests; you then appeal to the media and legislatures to change the laws that the courts used to reject your claims. Some arenas are tightly linked in a hierarchy, with an accepted progression from one to another: you lose in one court and appeal to a higher court. Others are loosely linked: once Mubarak had resigned, protestors turned their attention to the elections that would follow.

Structural changes in the rules of arenas are the ultimate goal of big protest movements, which hope to make their own future actions easier. We saw this plainly with the

“Wilkes and Liberty” movement, which was trying to craft basic civil liberties, but it is just as clear in Egypt, where protestors wanted radical reforms of the arenas of the state. The 1960s US women’s movement pursued laws that would create legal arenas where they could sue for economic justice, having already won the right to vote in 1920.

Some tactics unfold in **secret arenas**, which may or may not result in public revelations. Thus spies – more often employed by the police but sometimes also sent by protest movements – try to work undetected; going public means the end of their utility as spies. But even corporate spies who infiltrate protest groups may occasionally need to go public, taking evidence to the police that is damning enough to provoke interventions. In the US, corporate spies are not subject to the same entrapment restrictions as the police, so they have been known to aid and encourage an individual to plan or plant bombs in order to discredit the movement she claims to be part of (Jasper and Nelkin 1992: 50).

Secret activities by protestors usually aim at some scandalous **revelation**, like the Anonymous hackers who send corporate emails to Wikileaks. The animal rights movement received a big boost from break-ins and whistleblowers who provided video footage of horrendous laboratory experiments on animals that was never meant to be public.

The audience segregation dilemma

Protest groups (and other players) try to convey different messages to different players. They might want to appear benignly moral to the general public yet appear threatening to their corporate targets. They might assure their members that victory is imminent but appeal to new recruits by portraying everything as urgently up for grabs. Many groups discuss radical goals amongst themselves while embracing moderate demands publicly. But in a world permeated by media, not to mention spies, it is difficult to send different messages to different audiences. Coded language helps, and a distinct language helps even more. But there is always a risk that someone will record you, translate your words, and portray you as deceitful.

The best way to restrict a message to a select audience is to have a code that others cannot understand, but this is difficult in modern politics. Controversial orators may use *coded language* that their supporters understand but journalists do not – or at least the most controversial meanings can be denied if necessary. Another case is oppressed groups who literally speak another language, like the indigenous peoples of Latin America. They often broadcast programs in their own languages that Spanish speakers cannot understand. In response, the Ecuadorean government tried to curtail these broadcasts, apprehensive about subversive messages or at least insubordinate tones. Even these broadcasters run the risk that someone will translate their words into Spanish,

making them available to audiences for whom they were definitely not intended.

Persuading others

Despite occasional engagements with the coercive forces of order or their own resort to aggressive or even violent tactics, protestors' main activity consists of persuasion: trying to arouse helpful beliefs, feelings, and actions in other players, as well as in their own members.

Protest complicates democracy, at least the democracy of voting for candidates and referenda. It offers other ways of expressing urgent opinions that voting cannot accommodate. The media and politicians are well aware of the costs of different forms of voice, and weigh them accordingly. Signing an online petition may only take a few seconds, emailing a legislator a few minutes; going to a rally may occupy several hours, while getting arrested could take several days. Founding, running, or working for a protest group, or a series of groups, can take a lifetime – undeniable proof of deep moral commitment.

Charles Tilly (2008), recognizing near the end of his life that cultural persuasion is the core of what social movements do, suggested that protestors engage in **WUNC displays** for others: they try to demonstrate their moral Worth, their Unity, their large Numbers, and their great Commitment to the cause. This ungainly but

memorable acronym may be Tilly's most lasting concept. WUNC displays are character work: moral worth and commitment demonstrate that protestors are good; unanimity and numbers show they are strong (although, in a world that values democracy, numbers also show that "the people" are behind the cause, reinforcing its moral legitimacy as well). If their moral assertions fail to persuade, they become dangerous villains; if their claims of strength fail, they look like victims or clowns. In one image, Egyptian protestors made Khaled Said a giant hero, holding up a ridiculous (and tiny) Mubarak. Character work, recall, is a key arena, in which players try to portray themselves in a good light and their opponents in a bad light.

The bystanders who watch demonstrators march past – or see them on television – are not the only audience, of course. All the other players are watching as well, if indirectly, even when they are thousands of miles away, like the international human rights groups (a type of international non-governmental organization, or INGO), which bring attention (and often funding) to local groups. Because global capitalism has left us with rich countries and poor countries, the donors are usually in the rich countries and those asking for funds are in the poor. A group knows that if it can draw the attention of a prominent organization like Amnesty International, it will also attract media coverage, donations, and diplomatic support. Groups like Amnesty are opinion leaders for other players.



Heroes are large, minions tiny. Credit: Carlos Latuff, Wikimedia Commons.

Political scientist Clifford Bob (2005) has studied how INGOs and local insurgents “match up” with one another. The insurgents must craft an identity as “the right kind” of people for the INGO to support, which often means they are the victims of a large multinational corporation (especially one that has created an environmental catastrophe), that they have faced repression from their own government, but also that they have not committed violent acts as part of their own protest. They must be pure victims, with no part of the villain mixed in. The character work that protest

groups do in order to appeal to INGOs thus constrains the tactics they can use against their own governments, pushing them down the nice path instead of the naughty. In addition to character work, the supplicants are more likely to get the attention of an INGO if they have a charismatic leader who writes and speaks English well (or whatever language the INGO uses), and if that person either is a celebrity or travels a lot. Personal contacts, the ability to sit down face to face, help a lot.

Just as you try to put on your best moral face, so one of the best ways to undermine your opponents is to raise doubts about their morality. This is just as true for governments as for protestors. The forces of order justify their actions by portraying protestors as disorderly, even criminal in extreme cases. In Egypt this character work failed, so the collapsing regime took an additional step: it withdrew police from the streets and emptied several notorious prisons. Gangs of newly free criminals looted malls and burned cars. “Anarchy,” the government newspapers screamed, trying to conflate protestors and criminals. Efforts to appeal to the fears of average folk often succeed, but the Mubarak regime lacked sufficient credibility, or time, to pull it off.

When he was not portraying protestors as immoral and dangerous, Mubarak’s other rhetorical strategy was to paint them as weak, ineffectual, and destined to fail, a view that under normal circumstances might deflate protestors’ own confidence. This approach works best before your opponents have occupied large squares, set fire to buildings, overturned police cars, and taken other actions that prove their strength. It is the same character

work that regimes throughout the world undertake to dismiss protestors as laughable – and one of the ways in which naughty tactics can have a positive effect, establishing the strength of the movement.

Another way to taint your opponents' moral reputation is to catch them in a lie, for nothing stains an organization's or an individual's reputation more. When it tried to portray demonstrators as ineffectual, the Mubarak regime was quickly found out: Al Jazeera television displayed the calm street scene being broadcast on state television next to the actual chaos of gunshots and

a burning police van. (In a similar case Syrian activists observed that the “man in the street” who appeared on official state television praising the Assad regime looked familiar; they managed to compile a video with 20 instances when he had been “randomly” chosen to represent public opinion!) When uncovered, lies – and clumsy news manipulation – are among the worst blunders, for you lose not just your credibility but a more general reputation for good intentions. Moral players do not lie.

* * *

Players go at each other, in a complicated sequence of anticipations, moves, countermoves, vetoes, alliances, character work, symbol creation, and more, spilling across multiple arenas where decisions can be made or opinions formed. These strategic games mix calculations and emotions, seductions and threats, persuasion and coercion. They are always complicated. But they

determine which players will get what they want, which ones will lose, which will be eliminated altogether, which will endure for the next contest. These engagements are the heart of politics.

Most social movements do not win or lose: they are not crushed and punished, but neither do they attain all the policies and structural changes they had wanted. If movements primarily have to do with persuasion, their major impact, if they have one, is often to change how large numbers of people feel and think. The next chapter looks at this type of impact, in addition to other successes and failures.