



Promoting Democracy for Creating a Better and Peaceful World:

Regional, National and Local Perspectives

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Networked Societies and Hierarchical States: The Emerging Challenge to Political Order

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In the past few years, public protests that have erupted in various regions across the world have sought to be understood as struggles in a number of ways: as struggles for democracy, against policy capture by vested interests such as banks and industrial corporations, against corruption and cronyism, against authoritarianism, and for justice, rights and freedoms. Technology—specifically the internet and mobile devices—is seen as an important instrument enabling protests and activism, especially because they are less sensitive to control mechanisms traditionally employed by governments of the world.

While the multiplicity of explanations does convey an impression that we are contending with a Rorschach Test¹ of social sciences, the wide variations in context, timing, triggers and demands of these protests indicates that there are multiple causal factors—and these differ from case to case. Any study of these protests must, however, contend with a simple, central question: Given that the protestors' grievances are not new, why did the protests take place only now (roughly since 2010)? Corruption, economic distress, political oppression and elite control of political power, among others—have been around for decades. What changed enough to cause

1. The inkblot test (also called the "Rorschach" test) is a method of psychological evaluation. Psychologists use this test in an attempt to examine the personality characteristics and emotional functioning of their patients. This test is often employed in diagnosing underlying thought disorders and differentiating psychotic from non-psychotic thinking in cases where the patient is reluctant to openly admit to psychotic thinking (<http://theinkblot.com/>).

people to get out into the streets to collectively voice out their protest? It is possible to identify a number of underlying factors, most important among them: youth bulge, urbanisation, size of the middle class, mobile-phone penetration, and growth of social media. It is highly likely that these factors—in various combinations—have a causal relationship with the eruption of protests. The “Why now?” question, can be explained by the fact that social-media platforms like Facebook and Twitter are of fairly recent origin and have pervaded societies at unprecedented adaptation rates. Text messaging over mobile telephone networks is older, but it was only in the last decade that mobile-phone ownership increased significantly as a fraction of the overall population. Thus the availability of technology might be one explanation as to why the public protests took place at the time that they did.

Technology also suggests a more profound implication. The proliferation of public protests—across democracies and authoritarian states—might be the first signs of a clash between contemporary hierarchically ordered states and their radically networked societies.

The structure of the contemporary nation-state derives from Enlightenment-era principles and Industrial Age organisation.² Almost every nation-state is organised in a pyramidal fashion, with the greatest power at its tiny apex.³ This mirrors the organisation of a typical corporation where authority and decision-making increases with higher layers of management. From tiny city states to continent-sized countries, one hierarchically organised nation-state differs from the other only in terms of the number of layers, extent of concentration of power at the apex and techniques employed to check the use of power by those at the top.

Each entity in the pyramidal structure is bound by rules or diktats imposed by 'higher authorities' who might possess (or claim) their power to do so as

2. Weber, M., Roth, G., and Wittich, C. (1978): *Economy and Society: An outline of Interpretive Sociology*, Vol. 1. University of Calif. Press; Caporaso, J. A. (1992): *Theories of Political Economy*, Cambridge University Press.
3. Merton, R. K. (1940): *Bureaucratic Structure and Personality*. *Social Forces*, 18 (4), 560-568.

deriving from the people. Throughout the pyramid, once an entity arrives at the margins of its authority, it must escalate the matter to an entity at a higher level.⁴ This system can do well when matters are routine. However, when faced with a non-standard challenge, hierarchy either slows down decision-making or elicits a standard—often unsatisfactory—response. Today's governments operate in a hierarchical manner, top-down and bottom-up, in silos, bound by hard rules and distinct leadership.⁵ The hierarchical state can learn to handle emerging challenges but the learning process itself takes time due to the same structural reasons.

While the structure of the nation-state has remained what it was, the societies they govern are in various stages of transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age.⁶ A networked society is flat, its demands are diverse and often inchoate, decision-making processes are amorphous, and leadership, diffuse.

In many countries, the worldwide communications revolution that started in the 1990s has now become pervasive, causing individuals to be far deeply and intimately connected to each other. This is not just about people connected to each other on Facebook and Twitter: individuals who can receive a text message on their mobile phones are plugged in to various local, national and international social networks (in the broad, non-technical sense of the term).

Information flows differently in networks, spreading from node-to-nodes, through various channels. Each entity in a network can receive, modify, and transmit information, limited only by what technology permits.⁷

4. Ibid.

5. Jan van Dijk, Anneleen Winters-van Beek, (2008): *Perspectives of Networked Governments*.

6. Anderson, B. (1991): *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition. London and New York: Verso.

7. Reihlen, M. (1996): *The logic of heterarchies: Making organisations competitive for knowledge-based competition*. Arbeitsberichte des Seminars für Allgemeine Betriebswirtschaftslehre, Betriebswirtschaftliche Planung und Logistik der Universität zu Köln.

Compared to their hierarchical forebears, radically networked societies have faster information flows and shorter attention spans.

When such societies encounter the hierarchically ordered structures of the states they are part of, there is a mismatch in terms of expectations, response times, and sensitivity to context. This is true, however democratic the state and whatever degree of accountability there is of its government. The unresponsiveness of the state undermines its legitimacy in the eyes of its society. While a networked society moves fast, a hierarchical government moves relatively slowly on account of its structure. To members of networked societies the hierarchical government appears slow, less responsive, and remote, hence lacking in credibility and legitimacy. The wave of public protests and the manner in which they were dealt is exemplary as described below.

Mobilisation and Counter-mobilisation in Key Public Protests, 2010-13

Tunisia

Mobilisation

One day in December of 2010, a 26-year-old Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, stood in front of the municipal headquarters in the central Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid, doused himself in gasoline, and lit a match. Bouazizi, the sole breadwinner for his family, had long battled local authorities as he sought the right to operate his street cart, sometimes paying bribes to the police. On December 17, 2010, as a policewoman confiscated his cart yet again, his rage boiled over and he immolated himself. Bouazizi's act served as the ultimate act of protest, resonating as a product of the everyday frustrations and humiliations confronted by millions of Tunisians—injustice, corruption, and crippling poverty.

Bouazizi's death would change the Arab world forever. It brought together, in a series of passionate protests, various groups dissatisfied with the

existing system of government, mostly consisting of unemployed youth,⁸ the under-30 who make up about 60 per cent of the region's population. The country's president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, was forced to flee Tunis for Saudi Arabia after 23 years in power. He was later sentenced, in absentia, to 35 years in prison for embezzlement and misuse of state funds.⁹

The Arab Spring was unique in its magnitude, and evoked plenty of careful scrutiny among social-sciences scholars to understand why it happened the way it did. Studies indicated that a high penetration rate of ICT (Information & Communication Technology) in Tunisia, and an active online presence of a significant proportion of the population, in particular the youth, could have facilitated the uprising and thus its scale. Tunisia, after all, has one of the most developed telecommunications infrastructures in North Africa, and of a population of 10.2 million inhabitants, 9 out of 10 Tunisians own a mobile telephone, and over 70 per cent have access to the internet.¹⁰ In 2011 as the revolution erupted, Tunisia had approximately 3.6 million Internet users and just over 1.6 million Facebook users. It is indicated that demonstrators used the internet and social-media sites to promote their cause and distribute videos documenting the protests. These tools and cell phones also aided in coordinating the protests.¹¹

Counter-mobilisation

Police, under higher orders, used riot gear to disperse the crowds. Some 40 to 50 protestors died in the aftermath of the violent dispersal. Rafik Belhaj Kacem was responsible for the police force which, according to eyewitness accounts, had used excessive force against the protesters.

8. Bay, A. (2011): Tunisia's remarkable revolt, January 18.

9. Stepanova, E. (2011): The role of information communication technologies in the 'Arab Spring'. *Ponars Eurasia*, (15), 1-6.

10. Internet World Stats (2011): Usage and population statistics.

11. Kirkpatrick, D. D. (2011): Tunisia leader flees and prime minister claims power, January 14.

Night-time curfew was declared by Ben Ali on 13 January, 2011, two days after the first wave of protests. President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali dismissed his interior minister in an attempt to stem the unrest.

The police acted under Kacem's orders, and Kacem was reporting to the Interior Minister. A hierarchy also depends on offices, each with a set of obligations and responsibilities. An office member's inability to deliver on those could result in his termination by a superior. In this case, the Interior Minister was of a stratum below that of President Ben Ali, enabling the latter to dismiss the former.

Egypt

Mobilisation

Protests from the Tunisian revolution spread to and across Egypt as well. The Egyptian revolt began on the 25th of January, 2011, and led to President Hosni Mubarak's resignation 18 days later.¹² Grievances of Egyptian protesters included legal and political issues—from police brutality, lack of free elections and freedom of speech, and corruption, to economic issues such as high unemployment, inflation, and low wages.¹³ The protests largely included the youth. Over 54 per cent of Egypt's population is made up of the under-24 demographic, and in 2011, 24 million Egyptians were between the ages of 15 and 29, referred to in the demographic security field as the “fighting age”.¹⁴

The most famous public protest of the Egyptian revolution would be the one at Tahrir Square. A key figure in sparking the protests was 26-year-old Asmaa Mahfouz, a member of the opposition-run “April 6 Youth

12. Mohn, G. C. (2012): The “Challengers”: The driving forces behind the youth's demand for change in the Egyptian Uprising.

13. “Egypt protests a ticking time bomb: Analysts”. The New Age (South Africa). Agence France-Presse. 27 January 2011.

14. LaGraffe, D. (2012): The youth bulge in Egypt: an intersection of demographics, security, and the Arab spring. *Journal of Strategic Security*, 5 (2), 9.

Movement," which generated tens of thousands of positive responses to rally against government policies,¹⁵ in exhortations made public in a Facebook campaign and video blogs.¹⁶ The Facebook group set up for the event attracted 80,000 supporters, and over 250,000 attended the actual protest.

Counter-mobilisation

To quell the protests, police used rubber bullets, tear gas, and concussion grenades. Plainclothes officers beat up several demonstrators.

The deployment of plainclothes forces paid by Mubarak's ruling party, has been a hallmark of the Mubarak government. The Ministry of Interior (MOI) State Security Investigative Service (SSIS), the police, and other government entities employ torture to extract information or force confessions. Two videos were leaked of alleged police torture of a man in a Port Said police station by the head of investigations, Mohammed Abu Ghazala.

On 6th February, 2011, two weeks into the uprising, negotiations involving Egyptian Vice President Omar Suleiman and representatives of the opposition commenced amid continuing protests throughout the nation. On 10th February, Mubarak announced he would delegate some of his powers to Vice President Suleiman, while continuing to serve as Egypt's head of state.

The police and other government entities act on authorisation from seniors who report to the Baltageya. The Baltageya is headed by Mubarak. This chain of command is indicative of an established hierarchy.

The Vice President here acted on behalf of President Mubarak, implying he is below Mubarak in the pecking order. Also, Mubarak was willing to

15. Stepanova, E. (2011): The role of information communication technologies in the 'Arab Spring'. *Ponars Eurasia*, (15), 1-6.

16. "Live blog 31/1 — Egypt protests". Al Jazeera News. 31 January 2011.

delegate some of his responsibilities to the VP. This act shows that he has the power to dictate the jurisdictional powers of Suleiman, indicating Suleiman to be below him in the chain of command. This further establishes the presence of a hierarchy.

Spain

Mobilisation

Due to the ongoing economic crises and the inability of the Spanish government to effectively address growing unemployment rates—the number of unemployed in Spain stood at 4,910,200 at the end of March 2011, up by about 214,000 from the previous quarter, while the youth unemployment rate stood at 43.5 per cent, the highest then in the European Union¹⁷—social-media networks through the Democracia real YA fuelled calls for demonstrators to take to the streets before local elections.¹⁸ The movement started on 11th May 2011 with an online group on Twitter and Facebook, over 90,000 protesters gathered across Spain, in Barcelona, Valencia, Seville, Bilbao as well as the capital, Madrid, for the first public protest on May 15th.¹⁹

From its origins in a network of activists utilising new social media to coordinate a series of protest marches in cities across Spain, the '15-M' movement, as it was called, has since then, in the space of a month, mobilised over 40,000 protesters in Madrid and 80,000 in Barcelona to demand: "Real democracy NOW!"²⁰ This movement is ongoing.

17. "El desempleo juvenil alcanza en España su mayor tasa en 16 años". La Voz de Galicia.

18. <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/europe/05/18/spain.protests/>

19. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-13481592>

20. Charnock, G., Purcell, T., and Ribera-Fumaz, R. (2012): 'Indignate': The 2011 popular protests and the limits to democracy in Spain. *Capital & Class*, 36 (1), 3-11.

Counter-mobilisation

Although they started off as peaceful mobilisations, the Spanish protests were met by the police with violence, beating the protesters with truncheons. Around 450 police officers from two different sectors were deployed by the city council of Barcelona alone, and in that aftermath, over 121 were injured.

The President of the Regional Electoral Committee of Madrid then issued a statement declaring the protests illegal because "calls for a responsible vote can change the results of the elections." Police units stationed at Plaza del Sol received orders from the Government Delegation not to act unless informed.

The protests were declared illegal by the President of the electoral committee. The police were then deployed by the various city authorities, indicating that the city officials act at the behest of the higher government authorities. This indicates a chain of command, and thus, a hierarchy.

China

Mobilisation

Even in some of the most restricted of states, there are indications of public protests both online and offline. According to research by the Chinese Academy of Governance, the number of protests in China doubled between 2006 and 2010 to 180,000 mass incidents.²¹

The uprisings in one locality, Wukan village, were fruitful in causing a forfeiture of the ruling Communist Party there, and the villagers held their first-ever ballot elections bereft of any other political interference.²²

21. [http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2012/02/rising-protests-in-china/100247/;](http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2012/02/rising-protests-in-china/100247/)
<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2012/04/07/democracy-comes-to-china-via-wukan/>
22. [http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2012/02/rising-protests-in-china/100247/;](http://www.theatlantic.com/infocus/2012/02/rising-protests-in-china/100247/)
<http://www.economist.com/node/21543477>

Frustration in Wukan reached a tipping point in 2009 when a small group of youth villagers in their 20s began to react to the injustice of having their village land taken away; they were also increasingly angered by the concomitant inequality and lack of opportunity. They shared information on the proceedings, and strategised largely using mobile phones and social media. In September of 2011, this youth group stormed the local government and chased out the local administration. A to-and-fro battle between the ruling government and the villagers ensued with several members being arrested, and the media getting involved. Two years after the first set of protests, the Wukan villagers were successful in installing a democratic leadership.²³ Like this, the marches in Ningbo, Shifang, and Dalian were all organised largely through micro-blogs, smartphone apps, and text messages.”²⁴

Counter-mobilisation

President Hu Jintao warned provincial and central government officials that China was "still in a stage where many conflicts are likely to arise," according to a report by the state-run Xinhua news service. He called on the officials to "solve prominent problems which might harm the harmony and stability of the society." This was followed by the rounding up of lawyers, activists and dissidents, increased online censorship, and deployment of massive numbers of police to quash any demonstrations.

With an increasing frequency of protests, President Hu summoned top leaders to a special "study session" and urged them to address festering social problems before they became threats to stability. Among other matters discussed, he urged those gathered to step up Internet controls and to better "guide public opinion." Soon after, the words "Jasmine Revolution," borrowed from the successful Tunisian revolt, were blocked on sites similar to Twitter and on Internet search engines, while cellphone

23. <http://www.possible-futures.org/2012/01/24/trashing-the-script/#sthash.cMss8yVZ.dpuf>

24. <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2012-10-29/protests-in-china-get-a-boost-from-social-media#p2>

users were unable to send out text messages to multiple recipients. Police presence and potency in cities also greatly increased.

Acting on President Hu Jintao's warnings, provincial and city government officials reacted to the growing uprisings by increasing police presence, rounding up dissidents and heightening online censorship. This implies that the police and those monitoring online activity were employed by these government officials, who in turn were acting on the orders of President Hu.

Brazil

Mobilisation

The first huge public protest in Brazil was organised on June 6, 2013, to protest the hike in bus fares that came into effect on June 1. But what started as a movement by the Movimento Passe Livre (Free Fare Movement), a group that operates online using social media platforms, to protest against rising public transport fares, escalated to include other issues. Protesters took to the streets to vent their anger over political corruption, the high cost of living, high taxes, and huge public spending for the World Cup and the Olympics.²⁵ Although the Brazilian government conceded many requests, the protests are still ongoing.

An interesting fact about this uprising is that the majority of the protesters are, on average, richer and better educated than the average Brazilian. A survey of demonstrators in Sao Paulo by polling firm Datafolha indicated the protesters were three times more likely to have a university degree than the rest of the population, and 81 per cent of respondents told Datafolha they heard about the protest via Facebook.²⁶

25. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/19/world/americas/brazilian-leaders-brace-for-more-protests.html>

26. <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/19/us-brazil-protests-impact-analysis-idUSBRE95I1LQ20130619>

Counter-mobilisation

Reaction to the uprisings was met with aggression from the police. News reports mentioned that police "lost control" when they began using rubber bullets against protesters and journalists covering the events. Governor Sérgio Cabral said he would make no comment on the police's actions, and that they were "not [his] problem", but the military police's.

When contacted, the Public Security Bureau informed that the Secretary José Mariano Beltrame would not rule on acts of violence during the demonstration and on the police reaction. The guidance given by the press office was to seek Colonel Frederico Caldas, spokesman for the PM. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff met with the country's 27 state governors and 26 state capital mayors to take measures related to improve funds management, public transport, health care, and education.

In a hierarchy, each official status has a number of obligations and privileges closely defined by limited and specific rules. Each of these offices contains an area of responsibilities and imputed competence.

From the Brazilian Governor's response to the police's actions, we can infer that either (a) this matter did not fall under his jurisdiction, or (b) he was decidedly nonchalant. Giving him the benefit of doubt, we can assume it was the former.

Even if that can be refuted, the existence of a chain of command in speaking to the journalists – to contact Col. Caldas, spokesman for the PM, instead of the Secretary – bolsters the argument that there does exist different strata and sub-strata in the Brazilian government, each with its own rules, responsibilities, and jurisdiction.

This is reinforced by the second point that indicates that President Rousseff met with the many state governors and mayors to discuss the protests. This indicates that Brazil's government is hierarchical in nature.

Conclusion

First, in radically networked societies, it is extremely easy to mobilise large numbers of people.²⁷ It takes a single text message, missed call, or tweet to share information about the time and place of protests. It is possible to create massive rallies like those at Egypt's Tahrir Square²⁸ and Bangladesh's Shahbag²⁹ with the same technology and resources used to create flash mobs.

Second, because these mobilisations do not depend on middle-level leaders who gather people on the ground, they are that much harder for the authorities to pre-empt. China's curbs on internet freedom,³⁰ for example, are the equivalent of putting grassroots leaders into perpetual preventive custody: it does not work too well. Netizens and censors are playing a cat-and-mouse game,³¹ with the latter trying to wipe out mentions of protest-affected areas as soon as they are published on the internet. Such measure, however, does not stop news, files, photographs, and videos from leaking out. Many democratic governments are toying with similar ideas, without realising how ridiculous and out-of-touch they appear with the realities of their networked societies.

Third, because these mobilisations take place in a networked fashion, they are many times faster than attempts at counter-mobilisation by hierarchically-structured authorities.³² This forces the authorities to go into

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27. DiMaggio, P., Hargittai, E., Neuman, W. R., and Robinson, J. P. (2001): Social implications of the Internet. *Annual review of sociology*, 307-336.
 28. Stepanova, E. (2011): The role of information communication technologies in the 'Arab Spring'. *Ponars Eurasia*, (15), 1-6.
 29. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/feb/13/shahbag-protest-bangladesh-quader-mollah>
 30. http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2013-09-10/news/41937650_1_online-rumours-chinese-internet-users-defamation-charges
 31. Stepanova, E. (2011): The role of information communication technologies in the 'Arab Spring'. *Ponars Eurasia*, (15), 1-6.
 32. Reihlen, M. (1996): The logic of heterarchies: Making organisations competitive for knowledge-based competition. *Arbeitsberichte des Seminars für Allgemeine Betriebswirtschaftslehre, Betriebswirtschaftliche Planung und Logistik der Universität zu Köln*.

reactive mode, and often without the appropriate tools to manage mass, non-violent protests. The use of force to disperse protesters, even if allowed by law, is deeply unpopular and causes greater revulsion among those who watch it on television and YouTube. State authorities end up acting late, using too much force—thereby appearing to lack legitimacy even if, technically, they have the law on their side.

As one of the authors has argued elsewhere: “The popular legitimacy of today's hierarchically-structured governments – and the political order they rest on – is under threat in radically networked societies.”³³ The contemporary state confronts the demands of the Information Age and is increasingly found wanting. In other words, corruption, bus fare hikes, tree parks or economic policies are abstractions or symptoms of the underlying dissatisfaction with the way the people are governed.

One reason the United States managed to emerge at the top of the world order is because it had the best political system for post-Enlightenment, industrial-age societies. It may well be that the nation that best reinvents itself for the information age will have a shot at being the next great superpower. While all states are coping with the challenges of the Information Age, China is distinguishable on account of its foresight and investment in attempting to resist the change, controlling the discourse within its radically networked society and mitigating the political consequences. Whether or not these efforts succeed, the People's Republic of China is unlikely to be among the first to reinvent its political structure.

While democracies do not have existential reasons to resist adaption to the Information Age, their ability to change will be limited by how much they can prevail over the bureaucratic rigidities they have acquired—and gotten used to—over the centuries.

33. Castells, M., and Cardoso, G. (Eds.) (2006): *The network society: from knowledge to policy* (pp. 3-23). Center for Transatlantic Relations, Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Johns Hopkins University.