THERE ARE WEEKS WHEN DECADES HAPPEN:
STRUCTURE AND STRATEGY IN THE EGYPTIAN REVOLUTION

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This article analyzes the 2011 uprising in Egypt in order to understand how an entrenched autocratic ruler could be toppled in a mere eighteen days. Refuting arguments that focus on the role of the social media, or divisions among the elite, and the alleged neutrality of the Egyptian military, I argue that a revolutionary coalition of the middle and lower classes created a breaking point for the regime. Key features of this mass mobilization included the refusal of protesters to be cowed by state violence, the creation of “liberated zones” occupied by the people, as well as “popular security” organizations that replaced the repressive security apparatus of the state, and strikes that crippled the economy in the final days of the Mubarak era. My research is based on participant observation in and around Tahrir Square as well as dozens of interviews with Egyptian citizens.

Since December 2010, a total of nineteen countries in the Middle East and North Africa have experienced some form of social unrest, ranging from small rumblings to mass protests, insurrections, and civil wars. After Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt were ousted in short shrift, there was an air of optimism, even inevitability that other dictatorships would soon come crashing down as well. But as the Arab Spring turned into fall and winter, it became clear that there was nothing inevitable about the collapse of autocratic regimes, making the sudden fall of Mubarak and Ben Ali appear all the more puzzling. Perhaps more than any other uprising in the region, the Egyptian case represents not merely a puzzle or paradox, but something more akin to a political miracle. After all, the Mubarak regime had held on to power for almost thirty years, was the foremost U.S. ally in the region, had decades of experience in crushing opposition movements, and was seemingly unhindered in its efforts to establish hereditary rule. Yet the Egyptian regime was suddenly swept away by a mere eighteen days of protests. How was this possible?

This article will attempt to answer this question by providing an in-depth analysis of these eighteen days, from when the mass uprising began on January 25 until Mubarak’s ouster on February 11. Theoretically, the research contrasts two approaches to revolutions: (1) the structural or state-centered approach that focuses on divisions within the regime and the ruling class, including external pressure on the state; and (2) a strategic approach that focuses on the dynamic interaction between the state and the opposition. The first part of the article inquires whether the structural model of revolutions can explain the revolutionary uprising in Egypt. The research focuses on several key structural variables for explaining revolutionary outcomes: the role of external pressure on the regime, the role of the military, the autonomy of the state vis-à-vis the capitalist class, and the agency of the middle and lower classes.

The second part of the article analyzes the strategies of the opposition movement and the regime’s strategies of social control during the eighteen days of the insurrection, which I
argue can be divided into three phases. Those eighteen days nicely exemplified Lenin’s observation, “There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen.”

In addition to secondary sources, I draw on interviews with dozens of Egyptian citizens, as well as participant observation. I have lived in Egypt since 2008 and was in Cairo during the uprising in January and February 2011, witnessing many of the key events first-hand. The photographs that accompany the paper were taken by the author.

STATE POWER AND REVOLUTION

Revolutions, like social life, are characterized by both structure and agency. This is not a new observation. Both theorists and practitioners have struggled to discover what many consider the key to unlocking the mystery of revolutionary upheavals. I follow Poulantzas (1978) in conceptualizing the state not as a “thing” but rather as an ever-changing set of social relationships. Rather than a monolithic entity, the state is better understood as a fractured apparatus, riven with contradictions. For Poulantzas, class relationships are primary, as he sees the state as the institutional accretion of past class struggles.

Over the course of three decades, the Mubarak regime was certainly subject to pressures from both the dominant and working classes, but I would add that it was also subject to pressure from the Egyptian military, and was not entirely immune to whisperings from external powers such as the United States. The Egyptian state can thus be thought of as an expression of the balance of all these social forces, which both pressed upon and propped up the Mubarak regime. This analysis attempts to account for these pillars of support upon which Mubarak relied during his thirty year reign: the loyalty of the elite, the backing of the military, the acquiescence of the middle and lower classes, and the support of key allies such as the United States which provided $2 billion per year in aid. However, between January 25 and February 11, each of these groups splintered. During the uprising, the structural relationship of the Mubarak regime with Egyptian society was fundamentally transformed, as the pillars upon which it relied crumbled beneath it.

For Poulantzas (1976), the crucial factor in the overthrow of dictatorship was a split in the bourgeoisie. Domestic capitalists were more likely to abandon the state, while comprador intermediaries for foreign capital often remained loyal to the state much longer. From a different theoretical tradition, much of the sociology of revolutions of the same period also emphasized splits within the elite. Most famously, Skocpol (1979) proposed that a crisis of state, leading to a breakdown in coercive capacity, creates a situation in which revolutionary movements may both emerge and succeed. Tilly (1978) proposed that revolutionary movements and their elite allies took advantage of political opportunities created by divisions within the polity. Yet another theoretical tradition, the “transitology” literature on democratization (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986), also emphasized divisions within authoritarian regimes that generated pacts redefining the system of governance.

An alternative set of approaches, by contrast, points to cases of revolutionary change without significant breaches in the elite. The “relative class power” approach of Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens (1992), for example, placed greater emphasis on the role of working classes and other oppositional groups in reshaping the state into a more democratic order. Kurzman’s (2004) analysis of the Iranian Revolution focused on the moment where mass protest outstrips the regime’s reserves of coercion. Jasper (2004) argued that the structural approach to revolutions does not provide the tools necessary to understand the agency of those who either actually instigate or respond to revolutionary situations. Instead, he urges scholars to focus on the strategies adopted by activists and their opponents. In 1905, Lenin famously argued, “The basic question of every revolution is that of state power” (Lenin 1905). But by 1920, he was emphasizing both objective and subjective factors: “It is only when the ‘lower classes’ do not want to live in the old way and the ‘upper classes’ cannot carry on in the old way that the revolution can triumph” (Lenin 1920). This article makes no
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There had been repeated small-scale unrest and a growth of activism in the preceding decade, including protests in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada in 2000, opposition to the Iraq War in 2003, the formation of Kefaya in 2004, the April 6 youth movement in 2008, as well as a surge in labor unrest that included the largest strike wave since the 1940s. But the regime had not blinked (Beinin and Vairel 2011; El-Mahdi 2011; Hopkins 2010). Egypt’s hybrid state tolerated limited political expression, but very little political action:

No other regime in the Middle East has such a comprehensively elaborated hard power capacity to deter and contain voice behavior. That it even exceeds what was the case in Saddam’s Iraq is due to the fact that the hybrid state over which Mubarak prevails theoretically permits protest as part of its liberal face, but in fact protest behavior is profoundly frowned upon by the regime’s authoritarian face. The consequence is the need for a hard power deterrent that exceeds in capacity what either a more authoritarian or more liberal government requires, one of the major paradoxes of the hybrid state. (Springborg 2009:11)

According to the U.S. embassy in Cairo, Mubarak had more than doubled the size of the internal security apparatus—estimated at 1.4 million strong—since taking office in 1981. 2 From a state-capacity perspective, the Mubarak regime was able to penetrate the society it ruled. Although there may have been certain parts of the vast desert wilderness that were not under regular surveillance, 95 percent or more of the population is concentrated along the Nile valley, on less than 5 percent of the country’s territory. Virtually all Egyptians lived under the watchful eyes of the state.

Furthermore, there is little evidence of any sort of political opening prior to the uprising; if anything, it had become more restrictive. The parliamentary elections in late 2010 resulted in the opposition being expelled from Parliament and Mubarak’s ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) winning 97 percent of the seats. According to Egyptian scholar Dina Shehata (2011), “the fraudulent elections of 2010 marked a departure from the limited political pluralism instituted by [Mubarak’s predecessor, President Anwar] Sadat.” In what follows I hope to show how the Egyptian case defies certain expectations of the different state-centered approaches, although the nature and strategic action of the state remain important in understanding this historic upheaval.

Contrary to other revolutions that were characterized by large coalitions that included dissident elite factions and/or members of the armed forces who cooperated with the mass movement to overthrow the regime, I argue that the revolutionary coalition in Egypt consisted of the middle and lower classes, but did not include members of the economic or military elite. Put simply, there was no dissident elite faction, no conspiracy of junior officers planning a coup, and no one in Washington pulling the strings. The actions of the business community, the military, and the Obama administration were contradictory due to internal divisions: at times serving to support the mass mobilization, and at other times undermining it. Instead, mass mobilization was crucial to the process of regime collapse.

**THE BUSINESS ELITE**

There is widespread agreement in the literature that a divided elite is much more vulnerable to revolutionary upheaval than a unified elite. Some have proposed that popular uprisings are unlikely to emerge, much less succeed, without the existence of elite conflict: “Non-élites mobilize when heightened elite conflict creates the opportunities and alliances which can
Mobilization justify the risks of collective action” (Lachman 1997:74). Egypt seems to defy these expectations, as I find little evidence of a dissident elite, much less an alliance between a defected elite faction and the masses. To be sure, there were divisions within the ruling NDP. This conflict revolved primarily around the issue of succession, with the new guard supporting Mubarak’s younger son Gamal and the old guard adopting the so-called “ABG strategy,” anyone-but-Gamal. However, these were divisions among regime supporters, and not the growth of any sort of elite opposition to the regime itself.

The divisions within the NDP involved both a generational conflict and a tension between military and business interests. Hosni Mubarak was a military man, having received training in the Soviet Union as a pilot in the Egyptian Air Force and then fighting in the 1973 war against Israel. His son Gamal, however, lacked any military career, opting instead to become an investment banker in London. Even before Gamal went into politics, there had been a gradual increase in the number of businessmen in the cabinet, from 2.4 percent in 1970 to 14.7 percent in 1981 and 20 percent in 1990 (Desouki 2011), while the number of generals in the cabinet declined. In recent years only the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Military Production, and the Ministry of Civilian Aviation were led by former military officers, whereas in the 1960s-70s, the number was much higher (Cooper 1982).

Tensions between the neoliberal agenda of business elites and the étatist agenda of military elites played out for decades in debates over privatization. In 1991, Mubarak signed an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that was meant to liberalize the Egyptian economy. However, these reforms were met with resistance by those who had an interest in safeguarding the state’s role in the economy. Only 91 of 314 state-owned enterprises were privatized, and state-owned banks still constitute around 70 percent of all bank assets. Elite divisions over privatization were visible even in contrasting statistics. General Sayed Meshal, former head of Egyptian Ministry of Military Production, estimated that 85 percent of the Egyptian economy is private—implying that further privatization was unnecessary—while others claimed the military’s share of the economy is 30-45 percent. In recent years, the National Organization for Military Production managed sixteen factories, producing a large assortment of products ranging from household appliances to olive oil to mineral water. The Egyptian military distributed bread from its own bakeries during the 2008 bread riots. Large-scale military investments included resorts, hotels, and major construction projects, such as the building of the main highway that connects Cairo to Ain Sukhna (see also Abul-Magd 2011).

Gamal Mubarak joined the NDP in 1999, but did not become a major force until 2002 when he launched the “New Thinking” (Fikr Gedid) reform program at the party congress and began to move against some of the old-guard figures. The first to be marginalized was Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Agriculture Yousef Wali, who was ousted from the cabinet a few weeks prior to the 2002 congress. Other members of the old guard, such as Kamal al-Shazli and Safwat al-Sherif, were not kicked out but allegedly weakened (El Amrani 2011).

Al-Shazli had been the Minister for Parliamentary Affairs and also Deputy Secretary-General, or party whip. One of the longest serving parliamentarians in the world, he was first elected in 1964 and served until his death in November 2010. Al-Shazli was a political operative with an extensive network of contacts throughout the country, especially in Upper Egypt, whose knowledge of local politics was thought to be “unparalleled,” enabling him to deliver elections. He was replaced by Ahmed Ezz, a close associate of Gamal and a businessman with a monopoly of the Egyptian steel industry. In addition to the shift in class position, from a man of the state to a man of capital, the differences between the old guard and the new guard were also a matter of style, or how to perform politics. In the words of one observer, “Ezz bought people; he didn’t know people” (personal interview with political analyst, Cairo, November 12, 2011).

However, these tensions were not irreconcilable. On the contrary, the Mubarak regime incorporated both people with vast political networks as well as people with vast personal
fortunes. Indeed, the later period of the Mubarak regime was characterized by a growing alliance between the state and the business elite, which had become increasingly institutionalized with the so-called businessmen’s cabinet of Ahmed Nazif in 2004. To name only the most prominent examples: Zoheir Garraneh, who runs one of the country’s biggest automobile dealerships, became Minister of Transport. Youssef Boutros-Ghaly, a senior IMF executive, became Minister of Finance. Hatem El-Gabaly, founder of the largest polyclinic in the Middle East, became Health Minister; the top exporter of Egyptian cotton, Amin Abaza, became Minister of Agriculture. Rachid Mohamed Rachid, president of Unilever North Africa, Middle East, and Turkey, became Trade Minister (Desouki 2011). After Gamal introduced these key acolytes, “it became more accurate to talk of a power-sharing arrangement within a fragmented party rather than all-out rivalry between old and new guards” (El Amrani 2011). Some members of the old guard, such as Safwat Sherif, even switched sides and reinvented themselves as supporters of Gamal.

But what of the business elite who remained outside the ranks of the NDP? After all, not every businessman could be given a ministerial position; not everyone could become the CEO of a privatized state industry. Hence at least in theory there remained the possibility that those capitalists who were excluded from the inner circle may have been disgruntled at having to make their money without the benefit of political rent.

Here again, this does not seem to have been the case. Although well-heeled Egyptians may have been alienated from the regime, and although individual businessmen may have expressed dissatisfaction with certain policies, there is no evidence of the formation of a dissident faction among the economic elite. For example, Hussein Sabbour, the president of the Egyptian Businessmen’s Association (EBA), expressed anger that insiders such as Ahmed Ezz benefited from monopolistic control of the steel industry. Yet the EBA refrained from translating these personal views into collective demands. According to Sabbour, none of the 500 businessmen who belong to the EBA donated money to support the occupation of Tahrir (personal interview with Hussein Sabbour, Cairo, June 7, 2012). There is scant evidence of any sort of organized dissident capitalist faction, much less any significant pressure on Mubarak to resign.

On the contrary, even those businessmen who were not considered close to Mubarak were willing to sacrifice profits in order to appease the regime. All three major cell phone and Internet providers in Egypt shut down their service on January 28, on instructions from the government. The CEOs of these companies include Naguib Sawiris (Mobinil), Hatem Doweidar (Vodafone), and Gamal El Sadat (Etisalat). They were not known as regime insiders. At the time of writing, they are not included in the list of businessmen who are being investigated for corruption. Yet they abided by the order, while the Egyptian Telecommunications Service, the country’s landline company, refused.

There are of course many individual businessmen whose political maneuverings pre- and post-Mubarak could be discussed. Among the most prominent is Naguib Sawiris, who is estimated by Forbes magazine to be worth $2.5 billion and ranked as the second richest Egyptian (after his father Onsi). Sawiris, head of Egypt’s largest private-sector company, Orascom, and a member of the Coptic community, declined to become a member of the NDP and established an independent newspaper and satellite television network in 2004 that covered the protests extensively. In an interview in May 2011, he claimed, “I’ve always been very critical of the lack of freedom under the old regime…” (Enigma, May 2011), and yet his “criticism” was cautious at best, as interviews he gave before the toppling of Mubarak indicate. Indeed, it is unlikely that he would have acquired one of the largest contracts in the Egyptian telecom industry if he had been truly outspoken. When the uprising began in January 2011, Sawiris maintained a cautious approach, even admonishing the demonstrators to go home after Mubarak gave his first televised response to the protests, promising not to run for re-election in the fall. Sawiris’s Mobinil obediently shut off telecommunications
and Internet service when asked, as mentioned above. Neither in word nor deed did Sawiris sup-
port the popular demand that Mubarak step down immediately. When it became clear that
Mubarak would have to go, Sawiris supported Omar Suleiman, head of the intelligence services,
as a possible successor. But the protesters denounced Suleiman as “Mubarak II,” accusing him
of overseeing the systematic use of torture and widespread human rights abuses. The day after
Mubarak appointed Suleiman vice-president, graffiti had been written on the side of army tanks
in Tahrir demanding “No to Mubarak; no to Suleiman” (see figure 1). Sawiris was hardly the
“billionaire rebel” that some observers suggested (Bloomberg Markets, December 2011).

In sum, divisions among the elite were neither serious nor increasing when the uprising
began in Egypt on January 25, 2011. On the contrary, the business elite had largely been co-
opted. In addition to allowing non-party members to obtain major contracts, the Mubarak
regime had another mechanism to secure the loyalty of the elite: the transfer of govern-
ment land into private hands, sold for piasters. Through fear of retribution, sweetheart deals, or the
promise of ministerial positions, the regime had managed to avoid organized elite opposition.
The only discernible conflict among the elite was taking place within the regime, and that
revolved around the question of whether the son should or should not replace the father. The
revolutionaries, by contrast, were opposed to the entire apparatus of the regime. One of the
more prominent banners on Tahrir during the 18 day uprising featured eight regime figures in
addition to Mubarak (Figure 2). These included (from left to right): Farouk Hosny (Minister
of Culture), Youssef Boutros-Ghaly (Minister of Finance), Youssef Wali (Minister of
Agriculture), Ahmed Ezz, (steel magnate and the NDP’s Secretary of Organizing) Anas
Alfiy (Minister of Information), Safwat Sherif (Secretary General of the NDP), Fathi Sourer
(Speaker of the People’s Assembly), and Habib el Adly (Interior Minister), who the
revolutionaries considered part of the regime they were aiming to topple. The Egyptian people
did not take to the streets because they had perceived any particular elite conflict that they
could exploit to their advantage, or because of a sudden opening in the political opportunity
structure. On the contrary, the regime had become almost a textbook example of what Marx
referred to as “a committee for managing the collective affairs of the bourgeoisie.” The
revolutionaries had no allies among the business elite.
Notes: From left to right: Hosni Mubarak, Farouk Hosny, Youssef Boutros-Ghaly, Youssef Wali, Ahmed Ezz, Anas Alfiky, Safwat Sherif, Fathi Sourer, and Habib el Adly. Photograph taken by the author on Tahrir Square on February 8, 2011.

A broader discussion of the antinomies of the Egyptian military would be outside the scope of this article (for histories of the Egyptian military, see Abdel-Malek 1968; Perlmutter 1974; Cooper 1982; McGregor 2006; Cook 2007). Nevertheless, the behavior of the military during the uprising cannot be fully understood without some reference to its past role in Egyptian society. There is some disagreement among scholars on this point. On the one hand are those who argue that, over time, the influence of the Egyptian military has declined as it has “disengaged” (Harb 2003) from politics or “professionalized” (Gotowicki 1997) or, formulated another way, that the state apparatus has been “demilitarized” (Cooper 1982). At odds to this line of reasoning, Steven Cook (2003) maintains that the Egyptian military can best be understood as “ruling but not governing.” Others argue that while the military may have lost some of its former influence, the role of the security and intelligence services has been elevated (Springborg 2009; Kandil 2011).

Some observers have likened the uprising in 2011 to the revolution of 1952: both involved coups in which the military removed a long-time leader and took power into its own hands, the Free Officers in 1952 and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in 2011 (Sedra 2011). Others have portrayed the role of the military as supportive of the revolution (Barany 2011; Goldstone 2011; Lahoud, DiMeo, Jebb, Perliger, Beittler and Ringquist 2011) or even attributed the successful ousting of Mubarak to the military’s decision “not to shoot” at protesters (Bellin 2012) or the coercive apparatus’ “failure to repress” (Lachapelle, Way, Levitsky 2012). In this section I will make a different argument based on two observations: (1) Over the course of eighteen days, 846 people were killed in violent confrontations with the security forces. As someone who witnessed unarmed protesters being shot at by security
forces, I believe it is erroneous to describe the Egyptian uprising as peaceful or nonviolent. On the contrary, during the first week of the uprising, the military stood by the regime and supported the police in their efforts to suppress protests. Rather than exhibiting a “failure to repress”, it would be more accurate to say that the military failed to prevent the violent repression by other branches of the coercive apparatus. (2) One week into the revolt, the military switched sides and declared that it would not use force against the demonstrators. This decision only came after the people had already changed the balance of power in their favor by defeating the hated police force, taking control of public space, and establishing alternative forms of ‘popular security’. Far from causing the revolution, the military belatedly acknowledged it, while seeking to preserve as much of the status quo as possible.

On paper, the Egyptian military is the strongest in the Arab world. It is capable of mobilizing approximately 480,000 soldiers (900,000 including reservists), 3,000 tanks, 550 fighter aircraft, 250 helicopters, and 50 warships. Its strength lies in the sheer number of men it can recruit and the yearly infusions of American military aid, which allow it to purchase state-of-the-art weaponry, such as F-16 fighters and M1A1 tanks (Razoux 2011). Beyond the number of men and matériel it has at its command, however, the Egyptian military, like the wider Egyptian society, is characterized by enormous gaps between rich and poor. Enlisted soldiers earn 125 Egyptian pounds per month (approximately $20), while the highest-ranking generals, it is estimated, earn upwards of 200,000 pounds (approximately $33,100). Of course every military is organized around a hierarchical structure, with differences in pay scale and prestige. However, many countries try to bridge these differences through a noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps, which is often also a vehicle for mobility within the military. Originally the NCO played this role in the Egyptian military as well; however, the type of social mobility that was possible in the 1950s and 1960s no longer exists. According to Egyptian scholar Tewfik Aclimandos (2011:16), “It has become almost impossible for an underprivileged man or the son of a petit-bourgeois family to be admitted to the Military or Police Academies. Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak would probably not be admitted today.” These class divisions are not only damaging for morale, but could potentially also affect combat capabilities. A U.S. embassy cable released by Wikileaks described how mid-level officers were “harshly critical” of Defense Minister Mohamed Hussein Tantawi and referred to him as “Mubarak’s poodle.” The same cable describes how the institution of the military had been in decline, in part due to the fact that the defense minister valued loyalty to the regime more than competence. The military reached its peak of influence in the late 1980s. After Mubarak removed Defense Minister Abu Ghazalah in 1989, the regime has not allowed any charismatic figure to reach the senior ranks as part of its “coup-proofing.”

In theory, the State Security (amn al-dawla), Central Security (amn markazī), and intelligence service (mukhābarāt) were responsible for internal security, but in practice the army also played this role (Aclimandos 2011). In Henry and Springborg’s (2011) assessment: “The raison d’être of the military was always to support the Mubarak regime, not defend the nation.” On the evening of January 28, 2011, as protests widened, the military was given orders by Mubarak to support the police, according to testimony given by Defense Ministry Tantawi at President Mubarak’s trial, and later leaked to the public:

Question: When the events started on January 25 and until February 11, was there any meeting held between you and the former President Hosni Mubarak?

Tantawi: No direct meetings, but on January 28 when we received orders from the president. There was communication between us.

Question: What did the president convey during such meetings?

Tantawi: Meetings between us were held to know the stance of the armed forces, especially on January 28 when the military was ordered to go down and support the police in fulfilling its
duties. There was former [advance] planning by the military, and this is a drill conducted by
the military in case we need to go down with the police. The military goes down to the streets
when the police need its help and when they cannot fulfill their duties and when the president
orders the head of the military to take such action. The president gave the orders to the head of
the military for the forces to go down and protect the important facilities, and this is what
happened. (translation by McClatchy news service, September 27, 2011)

The police had been attacking peaceful demonstrators in an attempt to prevent them from
reaching Tahrir Square. After hours of street battles, the police had run out of ammunition,
and now faced tens of thousands of enraged civilians empty-handed. Eye-witnesses claim that
the police were resupplied with ammunition by soldiers driving military jeeps. Some
witnesses also observed soldiers shooting protesters on January 28. One of my interviewees
said he saw a soldier kill approximately twelve people that night (personal interview with an
Egyptian activist, Cairo, November 11, 2011). Hundreds of people were killed on that one
day, and thousands more wounded. After the 28th, soldiers were deployed throughout Cairo
and other cities. A retired major in the Egyptian army has claimed that mukhābarāt infiltrated
the protests and casually “surveyed” soldiers, asking if they would shoot at demonstrators
(Personal interview with a retired major in the Egyptian army, Cairo, November 12, 2011).
Some of the soldiers who occupied Tahrir overnight on January 28 even allowed the
protesters to spray paint anti-Mubarak slogans on the side of their tanks (see figure 1). Two
soldiers I interviewed admitted to participating in the uprising without wearing their uniforms,
a courageous act considering that, had they been caught, they could have been charged with
treason.

After supporting the police’s attempt to crush the uprising, the army changed tack and
issued a statement on January 31 that proclaimed: “To the great people of Egypt, your armed
forces, acknowledging the legitimate rights of the people... have not and will not use force
against the Egyptian people” (BBC, January 31, 2011). While the generals’ decision to switch
sides may be commendable, it should not be forgotten that, according to Tantawi’s own
testimony, during the bloodiest period of the uprising the army was supporting the police, as
they killed perhaps as many as 800 people. Although the army largely abstained from using
force for the remainder of the uprising, it also did not prevent violent attacks on peaceful
demonstrators, most notably on February 2 during the so-called “Battle of the Camel” in
Cairo’s Tahrir Square. Thugs riding camels and horses stormed onto the square, although it
was being guarded by military checkpoints, and assaulted protesters. At least a dozen people
were killed in this incident and many were wounded. I had been attending the protests at
Tahrir as a participant observer almost every day during the uprising, and on February 2 I
tried to access the square from the side near the Omar Makram mosque in the afternoon,
before the incident took place. The soldiers at the checkpoint on that particular day, however,
forbade me from entering, and I cannot help speculating, as this was the only day I was not
allowed onto Tahrir, that they had some advance warning and instructions to keep outside
observers like myself off the square.

After Mubarak stepped down, the regular army units were moved out of Cairo, and the
military police took control over policing demonstrations and maintaining order in the cities,
as the military police are generally considered to be more loyal than the rank-and-file in the
army. The revolutionaries were not supported by any dissident junior officers, and certainly
had no allies among the generals.

THE UNITED STATES

For a generation, the sociology of revolutions has identified international pressure as an
important factor leading to state breakdown and revolutionary upheaval. In its most influential
formulation, this pressure takes the form of military and economic competition (Skocpol
1979), but others have broadened the case to include “direct foreign intervention or support—or withdrawal of that support,” such as “the pattern of initial U.S. support for dictators, followed by reduction or withdrawal of that support,” which has “increasingly … contributed to the outbreak of revolutionary conflicts” (Goldstone 2003:74).

Soon after the uprising began in Egypt, the Mubarak regime embraced a sinister version of this argument, unleashing a xenophobic campaign that blamed foreigners for instigating the turmoil (Al-Masry al-Youm, July 18, 2011). Government officials and state media spoke incessantly of ajendāt khārīgeyyā (foreign agendas), qilla mondassa (the subversive minority), ʿonṣor thālīth (the third agent), and ayādī khafeyya (hidden hands). Simultaneously, American neoconservatives such as Elliott Abrams (2011) brazenly tried to give credit to the Bush Administration, calling the uprising an outgrowth of the “freedom agenda” and the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq.

Scholarly treatments of Mubarak’s fall are more circumspect about the role of foreign influence. Some observers have noted that the Obama administration, after initially supporting Mubarak, began to quietly urge him to hand over power to the generals; others interpret U.S. actions as supportive of Mubarak until the end (Brownlee 2011; Carothers 2012; Gardner 2011; Lynch 2012; Petras 2012; Prashad 2012). But all of these scholars agree on one point: there was no withdrawal of U.S. support for Mubarak prior to January 25, 2011. The uprising was not triggered by international pressure on the Egyptian regime.

A full accounting of the role of foreign powers would need to assess a number of actors, including Saudi Arabia, Israel, the European Union, and others. Given the hegemonic role of the United States and its close relationship with Egypt, however, I will focus my analysis on the role of the U.S. government. Egypt has been a major ally of the United States since the late 1970s, when it signed the Camp David Accords. The importance of Egypt to the United States is symbolized by the fact that the American embassy in Cairo is the second largest in the world, second only to Baghdad. Egypt has received more than $1.5 billion annually in U.S. aid since 1979, second only to Israel (Sharp 2011), and the Egyptian military relies on U.S. assistance for 80 percent of weapons procurement and 30-40 percent of its budget overall (Lahoud et al. 2011). The United States was potentially in a position to exert more pressure on the Mubarak regime than perhaps any other external power.

Furthermore, in his State of the Union address, delivered the same day as the Egyptian uprising began—January 25, 2011—Obama said: “The United States of America stands with the people of Tunisia, and supports the democratic aspirations of all people” (Obama 2011). Yet the same day, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton responded to news of the Egyptian protests with a statement of support for the regime: “Our assessment is that the Egyptian government is stable and is looking for ways to respond to the legitimate needs and interests of the Egyptian people” (Reuters, January 25, 2011). Several days later, with state violence mounting in Egypt, Clinton said U.S. support for the Mubarak regime had not changed, and “there is no discussion of this time about cutting off any aid” (ABC News, January 30, 2011). Several days after that, Clinton reiterated her support for the Egyptian government’s “ orderly” plans for transition, which would keep Mubarak in power for at least six months: “That is what the [Egyptian] government has said it is trying to do, [and] that is what we are supporting” (The Guardian, February 5, 2011). On Clinton’s advice, Obama sent a special envoy to Mubarak, Frank Wisner, a former ambassador to Egypt whose lobbying firm represented the Egyptian government (The Independent, February 7, 2011). Wisner’s public statements had long supported Egypt’s authoritarian system (Prashad 2011:41), and he was believed to have cultivated a personal friendship with Mubarak.

By early February, however, the U.S. had begun to hedge its full-fledged support. President Obama spoke with Mubarak by phone on February 1 and allegedly urged him to resign. “It is time to present to the people of Egypt its next government,” he reportedly said (New York Times, February 13, 2011). In public remarks after this conversation, Obama said, “What is clear—and what I indicated tonight to President Mubarak—is my belief that an
orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now” (WhiteHouse.gov, February 1, 2011). But then on February 4, with massive protests demanding Mubarak’s ouster, Wisner reiterated his view that “President Mubarak’s continued leadership is critical; it’s his opportunity to write his own legacy” (The Guardian, February 6, 2011). Wisner’s statements were clearly in contradiction to those that President Obama had previously made. American officials began talks with other Egyptian officials about a proposal that would involve Mubarak resigning immediately in favor of a military junta (The New York Times, February 3, 2011)—just the sort of transition that would occur on February 11.

Still, the United States government appears to have taken no steps to withdraw its extensive material support for the Mubarak regime. The Obama administration made no effort to restrict aid to the Egyptian government, although Congress was eager to cut off funds in order to remove Mubarak, according to comments by Patrick Leahey, who chaired the Senate subcommittee on foreign aid (MSNBC, February 2, 2011). American diplomats did nothing to help pro-democracy activists who were being attacked by police and pro-regime thugs. Margaret Scobey, the U.S. ambassador in Cairo at the time, felt that what the United States or any other outside power could do in Egypt was “very, very small” in the context of the “political tsunami” that the country was experiencing. And protestors did not act as though they expected American assistance—their placards and slogans assailed the ongoing U.S. aid to the Egyptian regime.

In sum, foreign pressure did not trigger the revolt in Egypt, as some state-structural theories have led us to expect. A more limited version of the state-structural argument suggests that foreign influence may still play a role after the emergence of popular unrest, by “constrain[ing the government] from using maximum force to defend itself” (Goldstone 2011:8). This narrative may be comforting and self-congratulatory, but is mistaken because the U.S. position did not begin to shift until after the Egyptian military declared its neutrality on January 31. Also, the Mubarak regime’s violence against the uprising continued unabated despite the U.S. government’s empty protestations—indeed, it continued during the subsequent transition period, which featured numerous deadly crackdowns on peaceful protesters (Austin Holmes 2012). Mubarak’s reliance on foreign aid did not prove fatal, as this aid was never withdrawn.

PHASES OF THE UPRISING

Contrary to other revolutions where a faction of the elite or military conspirators supported the uprising, or where external pressure was critical in weakening the state, this does not seem to have been the case in Egypt. The only substantial pressure on the Mubarak regime came from below. The eighteen-day uprising, as brief as it was, can be divided into three distinct periods, characterized by three different strategies of engagement between the regime and the opposition: (1) January 25-28, demonstrated the astonishing resilience of the uprising in the face of state violence; (2) January 29-February 8, characterized by a situation of “dual power.” (3) February 9-11, when the regime’s normalization strategy was met with a wave of labor strikes that brought down the regime.

*Phase 1, January 25-28: State Violence and Resilience.* The Egyptian uprising began on Tuesday, January 25, 2011, a national holiday that was officially a day of commemoration to honor the police. The uprising has often been described as leaderless and spontaneous. While this is partially correct, there were several groups that had engaged in antiregime activism for years: the Revolutionary Socialists, the National Association for Change, Kefaya, We Are All Khaled Said, April 6, the Democratic Front Party, and others. According to a secret U.S. embassy cable from 2008, an unnamed April-6 activist “alleged that several opposition parties and movements have accepted an unwritten plan for democratic transition by 2011; we are doubtful of this claim.” The report went on to describe this plan as “highly unrealistic.” It
would be unfair to the beleaguered activists who had been working for years, in danger of arrest and torture, to fail to acknowledge their efforts once they have actually achieved their goal. These groups put significant work into planning the demonstration on January 25th (Shehata 2011). Their intention was to subvert the original purpose of the holiday and instead to protest police brutality and demand “Bread, Freedom, and Dignity.” Asmaa Mahfouz, one of the founders of the April 6 movement, posted a video of herself online on January 18, calling on Egyptians to join the protest:

If you think yourself a man, come with me on 25 January. Whoever says women shouldn’t go to protests because they will get beaten, let him have some honor and manhood and come with me on 25 January. Whoever says it is not worth it because there will only be a handful of people, I want to tell him, “You are the reason behind this, and you are a traitor, just like the president or any security cop who beats us in the streets.”

The plan was to demonstrate in Tahrir Square, in front of the Ministry of Interior, with the protest beginning at 2:00 P.M. and disbanding by 5:00 P.M. As Asmaa explained in her blog, they sought to demand “human rights,” not “political rights.” What had been planned as an afternoon protest extended on into the night. People began to set up an impromptu encampment in Tahrir Square, but the first tear gas canister was hurled into the sit-in at 12:45 a.m. Ten thousand police and 3,000 special forces troopers expelled the protesters from the square (El-Ghobashy 2011). Although the following day was relatively quiet in Cairo, Suez was in flames. Three people had been killed in Suez on January 25 and more than a hundred injured. Activists began planning for a “Day of Rage” on Friday, January 28. Nasserists, Tagammu leftists, and the Muslim Brotherhood decided to join the protests.

In an attempt to forestall the gathering storm, the regime plunged Egypt into cyberspace darkness: the Internet and cell phone services were cut off just after midnight on January 27/28. One after the other, the five big Internet providers flipped the “kill switch”: Telecom Egypt at 12:12 A.M., Raya at 12:13 A.M., Link Egypt at 12:17 A.M., Etisalat at 12:19 A.M., and Internet Egypt at 12:25 A.M. This was unprecedented, and a much more drastic course of action than the Internet manipulation that had occurred in Tunisia, or even Iran.

Foreign embassies in Cairo began to advise their citizens to evacuate, with some countries even offering free flights out of Egypt. Universities and schools were shut down. The American University in Cairo, where I’ve been employed since 2008, cancelled classes and many of the international students and faculty left the country. Embassy personnel, the staff of numerous international organizations including the European Union and United Nations all abandoned ship. Left behind were some 80 million Egyptians, cut off from telecommunications and the outside world, facing a regime willing to kill its own people.

The shutdown of the Internet and cell phones suggests that the Mubarak regime credited social media with as much influence as outside observers did. On January 24, one day before the initial protest that launched the uprising, Time Magazine ran an article with the title: “Is Egypt About to Have a Facebook Revolution?” Three days later, Newsweek ran a story called “Inside Egypt’s Facebook Revolt.” Even before the uprising had begun, these and other media had already anointed Facebook as one of the leading protagonists in the unfolding drama. Though more tempered in their enthusiasm, a number of scholars have followed suit (J. Alexander 2011; Eltantawy and Wiest, 2011; Nunns and Idle 2011; Lynch 2012). Yet the shut-down of the Internet did not prevent the uprising from expanding. Social media may have been important for the initial planning stages of protest, but it did not reach most Egyptians. Facebook’s usage was estimated to be just 5.5 percent of the population (Arab Social Media Report 2011a:5), while Twitter was used by only 0.15 percent of the population (Arab Social Media Report 2011b:17). My intention is not to dismiss the undeniable importance of the social media, but rather to underline the fact that an accounting of the full range of revolutionary strategies is necessary in order to explain the collapse of an entrenched authoritarian regime.
In addition to the communications blackout, physical barriers were erected as well. Cairo was sealed off from the provinces. Suez was in a lockdown. Within Cairo, in an attempt to prevent the people from assembling in Tahrir Square, many bridges, streets, and metro stops were closed or blocked off. Undeterred, activists called upon people from all over Cairo to march downtown—by whatever means necessary—and converge in Tahrir Square. Despite the limited and reformist nature of the opposition’s demands, the regime responded to the day’s protest with massive force, including rubber bullets, live ammunition, tear gas, and water cannons, as well as the detention and arrest of peaceful, unarmed protesters. While this regime strategy may have deterred some, it mobilized others. To give just one example: 26-year-old Mohamed El-Waziry, who had studied engineering at Ain Shams University, was arrested while protesting on the 25th. He was taken to a military prison where he was beaten, interrogated, and kept in a cell for two days. On the 27th, they released him. He went home, took a shower, rested, and then went back out on the streets on the 28th; in his own words “to get revenge” (personal interview with Mohamed El-Waziry in Cairo, November 2011).

On the morning of January 28, I managed to take the subway downtown and make my way to the western side of Tahrir, along the Nile. Demonstrators approaching from the west had to cross either the Qasr al-Nil or Sixth of October bridges, two of the major arteries and march routes leading to Tahrir. Hundreds of police with armored personnel carriers were stationed along the corniche and on the two bridges in order to prevent people from crossing. At that time, around 1:00 or 2:00 P.M., perhaps at most a thousand people were battling against the police, who shot at them with water cannons and tear gas. There was so much tear gas in the air that even those of us outside the direct line of fire became dizzy and many were temporarily blinded. For maybe two hours I watched from the sidelines with two journalist friends as the small crowd inched towards Tahrir, braving the onslaught of the security forces. They would gain a meter or two, only to be pushed back. After a while, we decided that they were unlikely to make it across the bridge, and approached a police officer and asked permission to walk east across Tahrir, away from the clashes. The police, anxious to be rid of us as we were taking pictures and filming, shooed us along.

Tahrir Square was eerily empty, but blockaded on every side by armored vehicles and security forces. Along the way a woman called out to us and started to walk with us. I didn’t immediately recognize her, but had heard of her. She had been an anchorwoman on the nightly news but had quit her job after tiring of state censorship. Together with two other women she had then formed the “Shayfeen” group to monitor the 2005 elections. I was delighted to have met her unexpectedly, and we began to talk as we walked across the empty square, when suddenly we noticed that we had been surrounded by about fifteen policemen. They began to interrogate us, and demanded our IDs. She simply said, “You know who I am,” and tried to continue walking. They wouldn’t let us continue, but narrowed in on us and began to shout. I looked around for someone to help us or a shop to escape into, but everything was closed and the demonstrators were still far from Tahrir. I noticed we were next to a white, unmarked vehicle, the kind they use to detain people. My companion shouted, “My name is Bothania Kamel!” and walked defiantly forward and grabbed onto a lamppost with her right arm. I instinctively locked my arm around hers and the police narrowed in on us even farther. They began to shout at us, and she shouted back, “Protect Egypt!”, “Kefaya!” (Enough!), and other political slogans, both drawing attention to what was happening and attempting to shame them. I was shocked that the police would treat a woman of her stature, a well-known media personality, in such a demeaning and degrading way. She was a brave woman, a seasoned activist with years of experience staring down the regime, and yet I could feel with my arm locked around hers that her whole body was trembling. I made eye contact with the two journalists; they turned and left. As the harassment continued and the scene grew louder, I noticed that people had begun to gather on the balconies and that some were filming us. After what seemed like an eternity, the police perhaps realized that there were too many witnesses to be able to detain us, and finally let us go. We escaped into an apartment belonging to Pierre
Sioufi, whose balcony on the ninth floor, directly overlooking Tahrir, became the unofficial “headquarters of the revolution” (Cohen 2011; Oehmke 2011). Although I was a foreigner and complete stranger, they opened the door and let me in without asking a single question. For several hours, the situation remained unchanged: the police were in complete control of Tahrir. It seemed as if the police were invincible, and I thought that the various demonstrations taking part across the city would remain isolated from each other. From one of the side streets demonstrators would start throwing things at the police but would then be chased back. Every once in a while we would watch as the police caught someone and dragged them into the white unmarked van we had just been spared from. Then somehow, incredibly, some few brave souls darted onto the square from various directions. I thought they were insane. An armored police vehicle careened wildly around the circle and an old man wearing a long white galabeya appeared from nowhere to stand by himself in front of it—I screamed, watching from the balcony, panicked that he would be run over. The police vehicle stopped in its tracks and four or five people began attacking it with their bare hands. At some point people tried to run into the Square from various directions and the police began marching in military cadence, then running, from one location to the next—the sound of their boots was dreadful against the pavement. Suddenly the positions of the police began to change and the protesters were coming from multiple directions simultaneously—and the police began shooting at them. I saw so many policemen drawing their guns and shooting I lost count—policemen shooting point blank at their own people—and in broad daylight for everyone to see. It was horrifying; it felt like a war had started.

The people were still undeterred. They turned over the white round vestibules that police normally sat in at intersections, and turned them into rolling barricades. This way they could move down the street, gaining ground while staying protected behind the moving barricade. They used anything: street signs, cobble stones, ripping signs or pipes off of buildings, anything they could find, to fight for their goal—capturing Tahrir. Twilight was beginning to set in, and I looked out into the direction that we had just come from, the Qasr al-Nil bridge, where just hours before at most a thousand people had been fighting a losing battle to cross the bridge. I blinked my eyes, not sure if I could trust them with the billowing tear gas and smoke, and the dwindling sunlight. Masses upon masses of people—as far as the eye could see—there were masses of people marching towards Tahrir. It was breathtaking. The people were rising up, and the police were forced to backtrack. For the first time I thought, “This is a revolution.”

The fighting continued, but it seemed as if the tide was turning. When a critical mass of people from one direction would surge onto the square, wild celebrations would break out, but not far away vicious battles were still being fought, shots were being fired, and tear gas and riot smoke filled the air. People continued to stream into the apartment throughout the day and evening. Some of them were journalists, as Pierre, at considerable risk to himself, had decided to allow television crews onto the roof of his apartment—many of the iconic images of Tahrir were filmed from there. Otherwise it is hard to make any generalizations about the dozens, perhaps hundreds of people who came and went that day. Some were well-known, such as Khaled Abol Naga, one of Egypt’s most prominent actors, but most of them were unknown, ordinary people from all walks of life seeking shelter from the deadly violence on Tahrir. Standing on the balcony, we saw a huge fire burning not too far away. A man named Adam pointed and said, “That is the headquarters of the NDP. That is the Bastille.”

Some time after midnight, I ventured out with several people, this time in a different direction, towards the Egyptian Museum. That part of the square was darker and there were throngs of people. At one point some type of tumult ensued, although it wasn’t clear why, and I became separated from the group. Then, out of the darkness, I saw a line of tanks moving towards Tahrir, towards me. What happened next was less a thought process than a visceral reaction: as a student of Turkish history, with its long history of repeated military coups, my first instinct was to flee. Some people shared my instinct, and screamed in panic as they tried
to run. But the masses of bodies were so densely packed that it was hard to get anywhere very quickly. Then I noticed that instead of running away from the tanks, others were running to the tanks, and even climbing up on top of them and cheering wildly, celebrating the arrival of the soldiers.

Phase 2, January 29-February 7: Dual Power. January 28 was not only the day that protesters captured Tahrir, but, even more significantly, it was the day the people defeated the despised police force. All across Egypt, hundreds of police stations and an estimated 3,000 police vehicles were burned to the ground. The regime had no choice but to switch strategies again. This happened undoubtedly in recognition of the fact that their strategies until then had failed: the police had killed hundreds of people on a single day, but had failed to deter the rest, the physical barriers had failed to prevent protesters from reaching Tahrir, the state media propaganda had failed to brainwash people, and the telecommunications blackout had failed to prevent communication. The regime’s new strategy was to create a security vacuum. All the police who had not already abandoned their posts were instructed to do so, and the jails were emptied, with more than 17,000 prisoners, including violent criminals, released onto the streets. The telecommunications blackout continued. Hired thugs known as baltagiya were used to kill protesters as during the “Battle of the Camel” on February 2. Army soldiers guarding the checkpoints around Tahrir allowed the thugs to ride camels and horses onto the square, and remained passive as at least a dozen people were killed in the clashes. State media began a xenophobic campaign, blaming the unrest on foreign instigators in an attempt to delegitimize the protests. A curfew was set sometimes beginning as early as 3:00 P.M., in an attempt to keep people off the streets. Many government offices and private businesses were closed.

In addition to these repressive measures, the regime was forced to make a few concessions. After midnight on the 28th, Mubarak spoke to the nation, the first time he had ever been summoned by the street. On January 29, Mubarak appointed a vice president for the first time since taking office in 1981, and replaced his prime minister. On January 31, Mubarak reshuffled his cabinet, appointing several army generals in an attempt to maintain the loyalty of the military.

The strategy of the activists changed as well. At one point on January 28, someone came to Pierre Sioufi’s apartment asking for help to buy medical supplies. I decided to venture out with a group of about five people to find a pharmacy. People on the street stopped me and insisted on showing me the tear gas canisters and bullet cartridges that said “Made in USA.” And yet there was not a trace of hostility towards me, as a US citizen. A makeshift medical clinic had been set up in a nearby mosque. These clinics, staffed by volunteers, were crucial not only in saving lives, as there were no ambulances in sight or any other sort of provisions to care for the wounded, but also in contributing to “popular security” from below. This was the beginning of a popular strategy to create proto-state organizations that displaced the state-dominated institutions. Local residents organized legan shaabeya (neighborhood watch groups or popular committees) to replace the security apparatus, setting up barricades and checkpoints and demanding to see an ID for every person entering a neighborhood. Volunteers set up security checkpoints around Tahrir Square, and inspected every bag or purse that was carried in. Others brought blankets and tents to Tahrir Square, which was permanently occupied on a twenty-four-hour basis.

At least twenty-five popular committees were organized in neighborhoods throughout Cairo. In addition to replacing the police force, which had disappeared, they created a bridge between activists who were occupying Tahrir and those who remained in their neighborhoods. They also served to spread information and counterbalance the state propaganda. Although the security vacuum was real, misinformation was circulated in order to heighten the sense of danger, so that people would believe that it was unsafe to leave their homes.10

Tahrir Square and other “liberated zones” were quasi-utopian communities characterized by what Mohammed Bamyeh (2011) has called “noble ethics,” including “community and
solidarity, care for others, respect for the dignity of all.” He argues that this emerged “precisely out of the disappearance of government.” Qaed Ibrahim Square in Alexandria, al-Arbeen Square in Suez, and other public spaces throughout Egypt were occupied as well. As someone who visited Tahrir regularly during the weeks following January 28, I can attest to the compassion and kindness of the people, in contrast to the barbarism of the state. Even during the height of the xenophobic media campaign, when foreigners were being attacked on the street by baltageya, Tahrir itself was a safe haven, virtually free of any sort of discrimination or aggression. As a woman and as a foreigner, I never once experienced sexual harassment or antiforeign sentiment in occupied Tahrir Square. On February 3, one day after the Battle of the Camel, I took part in a small demonstration of US citizens on Tahrir. We agreed beforehand that our demands would only be directed to the US government and its policy towards Egypt. We carried a large banner saying “Solidarity with the Egyptian People” in English and Arabic, and smaller signs saying “Democratization occurs not through external intervention but internal uprisings: support the Egyptian people now.” Despite the xenophobic media campaign, we were greeted with an outpouring of enthusiasm, as people cheered and asked to have their pictures taken with our group. But much more significant were the public and intercommunal prayers that took place in Tahrir. These prayers were not only a religious ritual, but were a protest tactic to demonstrate solidarity between Muslims and Christians, and were intended to be a living bulwark against the emergence of sectarian tensions.

As many of the businesses were shut down, Tahrir was supplied with food, water, and other necessities by workers in the informal sector. Pre-Internet forms of media activism were revived as brochures and flyers were distributed by hand. On January 30, by chance, I met Hossam El-Hamalawy, a tireless advocate of workers’ rights, well-known blogger, and an old friend, who was, in lieu of blogging, handing out leaflets on Tahrir. People reacquainted themselves with landline telephones. And they defied the curfew. On February 2, after almost a week of the telecommunications blackout, during a critical period of the uprising, Internet services were restored.

Phase 3, February 8-11: Labor Strikes the State. Beginning on February 8, the regime strategy changed again. Concessions had failed to conciliate the protesters, the Battle of the Camel failed to clear Tahrir, and the curfew and security vacuum had failed to keep people indoors and off the streets. Instead of killing, arresting, and intimidating the Egyptian people, Mubarak ordered them to go back to work. If violence couldn’t end the uprising, perhaps a normalization strategy would. The curfew was pushed back to 6:00 or 7:00 P.M. so that people could go to work, then immediately return home rather than take to the streets in protest. But workers refused to work. Other protest tactics continued as before: defiance of the curfew, participation in proto-state organizations, and occupation of Tahrir Square. However, in many ways the locus of the uprising shifted, largely unnoticed by the media, from Tahrir to workplaces. Employees in both the public and private sector, including textile factories, newspapers, government agencies, sanitation companies, and petrol, mill, and transportation workers, all demanded economic concessions, as well as the ousting of Mubarak (Mata 2011). At the Suez Canal, up to 6,000 workers participated in a sit-in. Although the canal itself—the country’s second largest source of foreign revenues, after tourism—was never closed, the threat to its operation was clear (Schwartz 2011).

Before the uprising, only four independent trade unions existed. The vast majority of unionized workers belonged to the state-run trade union federation, whose purpose was not to empower workers but rather keep them under control. However, just days into the uprising, representatives of the four independent unions met in Tahrir and agreed to found the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (A. Alexander 2012). As Hossam el-Hamalawy has pointed out, workers participated in the uprising from day one, but as individuals and not yet as a collective force. Labor strikes were not an option as long as most businesses were shut down (The Guardian, February 14, 2011). As soon as the regime changed its strategy, workers did as well. This is all the more remarkable given that the independent unions did not
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have the capacity to organize nationally. It is estimated that over 20,000 workers halted production during the last three days of the uprising. “This latest wave is putting a lot more pressure on not just the government but the entire regime,” commented the head of research at a major Egyptian investment bank (The Guardian, February 11, 2011). “There are two or three scenarios, but all involve the same thing: Mubarak stepping down—and the business community is adjusting its expectations accordingly.” This strike wave continued and even expanded in the days following Mubarak’s departure. By 2012, several hundred independent trade unions had been established.

The role of workers in the informal sector should also be acknowledged in this context. It was an informal-sector street vendor in Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire and triggered the wave of rebellions across the region that came to be known as the Arab Spring. In Egypt, thousands of street vendors supplied Tahrir and other occupied spaces with the resources they needed to survive. Their contribution consisted not in withholding their labor power or striking, but in continuing to work, around the clock and in sometimes life threatening circumstances. A number of these street vendors were children or teenagers.

After eighteen days of repression mixed with minor concessions, after the killing of over 800 people at the hands of the security apparatus, a final concession was made on February 11 when Hosni Mubarak, after nearly thirty years, agreed to release his hold on power. Vice President Omar Suleiman also disappeared from public view. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power, promising to lead the country in the transition to democracy.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have examined the role of both structure and agency in the eighteen-day uprising in Egypt. The Mubarak regime represented a set of social relationships that relied on four pillars of support: the loyalty of the elite, the backing of the military, the support of the United States, and the acquiescence of the middle and lower classes. For almost 30 years, Mubarak maintained his hold on power by co-opting the elite, coup-proofing the military, and keeping the lid on social unrest through a combination of hard and soft power deterrents. Beginning on January 25, 2011, one pillar of the Mubarak regime crumbled beneath it as people took to the streets en masse, and the acquiescence of the middle and lower classes was no longer forthcoming. A week later on January 31, the second pillar began to look unreliable as the military said it would cease using force against the protesters, while also not preventing the use of violence by thugs or baltageya. On February 10, the third pillar represented by the economic elite began to give way. And finally, after Mubarak stepped down on February 11, the US administration officially bade farewell to their former ally. But the military aid, the most important material support that the US provides to Egypt, continued to flow—although over 840 Egyptians were killed by security forces. Protest continued, unabated, shifting from street demonstrations to the organization of counterinstitutions of popular security to widespread strikes. According to some estimates, approximately fifteen million people participated in the uprising, about twenty percent of the total population of the country.

The Egyptian case defies the expectations of the various state-centered approaches to revolution, primarily because the young revolutionaries had no allies among the elite, no allies among military officers, and no meaningful external support. In addition, the Egyptian uprising does not fit the image of other state-centered analyses of revolutions as summarized by Jeff Goodwin (1997): the state-autonomy, state-capacity, political-opportunity, and state-constructionist approaches. Scholars working within the state-capacity approach have documented how revolutionary guerrilla movements have often emerged in peripheral areas that are not thoroughly penetrated by the state. And yet in Egypt, the uprising was strongest in urban centers characterized by a heavy police presence. In terms of the political opportunity
structure, Egypt had by most accounts become more closed in the months leading up to the start of the uprising, not more open. From a state-constructionist perspective, one might argue that the Mubarak regime engendered protest through its arbitrary violence. However, it is hard to see how the barbarism of the state “constructed” the quasi-utopian nature of the liberated zones. Of Goodwin’s four state-centered approaches to revolution, the state autonomy perspective seems to be the most applicable: A state that can violate the interests of the elite and make concessions to the masses in order to preserve itself stands a better chance of surviving than one that lacks this autonomy. As discussed in this article, the Mubarak regime was characterized by a deepening alliance between the capitalist class and the state. And yet Mubarak was able to take several extreme steps, including: ordering the closure of telecommunication channels, which cut into the profits of these companies and the many businesses that relied on them; reshuffling his cabinet; and even sacrificing his own son, who represented the interests of neoliberal business elites, hoping these concessions would allow him to cling to power. Still, Mubarak succumbed to the revolution. In order to explain this, three features of this mass mobilization stand out, corresponding to the three phases of the uprising: (1) the refusal of Egyptians to be cowed by state violence; (2) the creation of “liberated zones,” supported by goods and services provided by the informal sector, as well as the creation of proto-state organizations that established “popular security” in the absence of meaningful state security; and (3) widespread strikes that crippled the economy. Many of these phenomena have continued since Mubarak’s resignation, though it remains to be seen whether Egypt’s new era of popular empowerment will ultimately lead to a full-fledged political and social revolution. Regardless of future outcomes, the uprising itself was nothing short of a revolutionary insurrection that shook the foundations of both the Mubarak regime and the wider region. The ground has not yet settled, and the future remains uncertain.

NOTES

1 A second paper (Austin Holmes 2012) analyzes the period after February 11, 2011, when the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) assumed power.
4 The summary of the official report by the Egyptian government acknowledges that at least 846 people were killed over the course of the eighteen-day uprising. It is believed that the vast majority of them were killed on the 28th/29th of January. The full 400-page report is still classified. It is possible that new figures will continue to emerge as some cases were not documented or registered in hospitals (http://www.ffnc-eg.org/assets/ffnc-eg_final.pdf).
5 Conservative estimates put the number of deaths during the so-called ‘Battle of the Camel’ at around a dozen (www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-19905435). According to other reports as many as twenty-one people were killed. (http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/55290.aspx)
6 Interview with former Ambassador Margaret Scobey, August 2, 2012.
8 I am indebted to Rebecca Fox for her research on this issue.
9 Adam Yassin Mekiwi
10 According to an article in Egypt Independent (April 17, 2012), Ahmed Ezzat, a member of the Revolutionary Socialists, was one of the people to initiate the first popular committees, a model that was replicated quickly.
11 In part due to the difficulty of traveling in Egypt during this time, and in part due to the general tendency to focus on Cairo, the events outside the capital have not been covered nearly as well by either the media or scholars. Because I did not travel to other cities in Egypt during the uprising, my own observations are limited to Cairo. Further research is needed in order to provide a more balanced assessment of what was a nationwide rebellion.
12 Yara Elhemaily conducted a survey of workers in the informal sector and found, among other things, that their earnings increased significantly during this period because they did not have competition from the formal sector as so many businesses had been shut down. Unpublished research paper written at AUC.
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