

The 2011 Protests: Were They about Democracy?

In 2011, throngs of protesters took to the streets, often at great risk to their lives, to challenge the results of undemocratic elections across the globe—in Bahrain, Benin, Egypt, Haiti, Morocco, Nicaragua, Nigeria, and Russia. Outside of elections, pro-democracy protests also took place in 2011 in Cameroon, Libya, Malaysia, Swaziland, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, among other countries.

These protests are striking, not so much for the number that occurred (2010 saw a large number as well) but for their magnitude, and the fact that so many of them took place so closely together in the Middle East and North Africa, a region that had rarely, if ever, experienced pro-democracy protests before. Prior to 2011, protests had never occurred in response to elections in Djibouti, Morocco, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, and only a handful of protests had ever occurred in Bahrain and Liberia. In fact, Haiti is the only country where protests occurred in 2011 where pro-democracy protests were a common occurrence.

Why did so many protests occur in 2011, and in such unlikely places? What, if anything, do these protests have in common with each other? Some contend that they were a result of pent-up frustrations over the lack of democracy finally breaking through the surface of society, while others argue that they were a result of a meddling United States fomenting rebellion abroad; still others point to modern technologies which make it easier for regime opponents to quickly organize large numbers of individuals. Although some of these factors may have aided the protests, the downturn in the global economy—and the

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worldwide economic discontent that it generated within society—played a much more significant role in provoking 2011’s massive protests than any of these factors.

All Fed Up

With movements in Senegal named “Y’en a Marre” (“We’re Fed Up. Enough is Enough.”) and rallies in Egypt and elsewhere referred to as “The Day of Rage,” one can easily understand why one prominent explanation of the 2011 protests is that they were a result of people’s pent-up frustrations over decades of undemocratic rule finally reaching a boiling point. Even President Obama described the Egyptian protests as an expression of people’s “pent-up frustrations” with the lack of meaningful reform in their country.¹

Indeed, the countries in which these protests arose were staunchly undemocratic. According to the Polity Index (a 21-point measure where negative 10 represents strong authoritarianism and positive 10 represents strong democracy), the average level of democracy in these countries was 2.5.² It was 5 in countries where protests did not occur. Nicaragua is the only country that was largely democratic in which protests occurred—it scored a 9 on the Polity IV Index in 2011, when Nicaraguans demonstrated against what they perceived as irregularities in the country’s presidential elections and against the arguably unconstitutional means by which the Supreme Court lifted term limits to allow Daniel Ortega to win a third term in office.

The countries in which these protests emerged in 2011 also had much less experience with democracy than those where protests did not occur. The former were democracies for an average of seven years after World War II, while the latter were democracies for an average of 22 years.³ (Nicaragua, which held its first democratic elections in 1990, had more experience with democracy than any other country which saw protests in 2011.) Democracy did not change much, for good or bad, in this period either. In fact, the Polity Index scores of those countries where protests occurred in 2011 did not change, statistically speaking,⁴ significantly more than the scores of those countries where protests did not occur.⁵

Actually, pro-democracy protests are not significantly more likely to occur in general when countries are steadfastly undemocratic, as the pent-up frustrations argument suggests. This is true even when countries become less democratic and the consequences of not protesting are greater. Pro-democracy

protests are actually more likely to occur when countries become *more* democratic because the democratization process opens up space for groups to organize protests.⁶ As countries liberalize, they often lift restrictions against public demonstrations and the media, allowing groups (like the February 20th Movement in Morocco) more freedom to operate, and are generally less inclined to use force against their own citizens. For example, the 2011 protests in Bahrain occurred on the heels of a modest democratic opening in Bahrain. In 2002, the country held its first parliamentary elections in 27 years. A third election occurred a little more than a year before the pro-democracy protests began, although it was highly circumscribed.

If countries democratize fully as a result of this liberalization process, there is little reason for pro-democracy protests to arise. However, this is not often the case. The democratization process is rarely, if ever, linear and is often imbued with numerous setbacks and detours, and even complete reversals. Frequently, as a result of these transitions, countries end up as illiberal democracies without clean elections, robust political freedoms, or civil rights.

The pent-up frustrations argument also fails to explain why people decided to rebel in 2011 in particular. Triggering events—such as the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, the death of Khaled Saeed in Egypt (who was beaten and killed by Egyptian police in June 2010), and the occurrence of pro-democracy protests in neighboring countries—are insufficient to explain why people chose this year to rebel. There were many events prior to the self-immolation of Bouazizi, generally considered the starting point of the Arab Awakenings, which could have triggered protests much earlier but didn't. In 2005, for example, five young graduate students set themselves on fire during a sit-in regarding unemployment in Morocco. In that same year, opposition candidates also boycotted Egypt's first ever multi-party presidential elections, which were anything but free and fair. In 2009, thousands of Iranians protested the outcome of Iran's tenth presidential election, which ushered Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into a second term in office. So why not protest in 2005? Or 2009? Or 2010?

Unmistakably, people's pent-up frustrations with the lack of democracy in their countries were on display during the 2011 protests. However, these frustrations, long-standing and ever-present, were not likely the precipitating factor behind the protests that erupted across the globe last year.

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Born of Foreign Hands

To discredit 2011's protest movements, authoritarian leaders claimed that the United States and its allies orchestrated them. In Egypt, the Supreme Council raided and shut down the offices of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) believed to have played a pivotal role in Egypt's emergent pro-democracy movement and to have illegally received funding from abroad.⁷ Putin similarly clamped down on internationally-funded NGOs in Russia after pro-democracy protests surprised Russian leaders; he also accused Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of sending a "signal" to Russians to take to the streets by questioning the integrity of the country's most recent presidential elections.⁸

The United States and its allies have poured billions of dollars of democracy assistance into foreign countries around the world. This assistance has been used to reform countries' political and legal systems, strengthen civil societies, and protect individuals' human rights and civil liberties. The countries in which election-based pro-democracy protests occurred also received significantly more foreign aid from the United States in statistical terms (\$13 million for the purposes of "Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance") in the five years leading up to the protests than the countries in which protests did not occur (only \$2 million).⁹ Some countries where pro-democracy protests occurred, like Bahrain and Benin, did not receive any assistance from the United States in this period.

However, the overall amount of democracy assistance that the United States distributed to these countries is quite low, and in many cases was highly circumscribed. In Egypt, which received more aid in this period than any other country, Egyptian law stated that NGOs could not accept aid from abroad unless the Egyptian government approved it first.¹⁰ As a result, the aid was not political in nature, instead going toward economic development and social service more generally.¹¹ In Russia during this period, harsh administrative and reporting requirements had hogtied internationally-funded NGOs, making operations difficult.¹² Russia received the second-largest amount of U.S. democracy assistance in this period, but did not receive any assistance from the United States after these restrictive laws on NGOs took effect.

As a result, democracy assistance, either in the form of verbal support or financial assistance, is unlikely to have stimulated the 2011 protests. It was simply too small and too restricted to have had that great an effect.

Technology Revolutions

Modern technologies—including cell phones, social networking sites like Twitter and Facebook, and the Internet in general—were important factors in the pro-democracy protests, so much so that many dubbed them Twitter Revolutions.

Opposition leaders and protest organizers each used Facebook and Twitter to attract supporters and generate publicity. Protesters used cell phones and YouTube videos to relay information about the demonstrations and share images of the events with international and domestic audiences, even supplanting conventional media when governments blocked it from reporting on the grassroots movements.

While these technologies were important tools used to organize the pro-democracy protests, they are not the cause of the protests themselves. Moreover, if these technologies had precipitated the protests, people residing in countries where protests occurred should have had better access to cell phones and the Internet than people in non-protest countries. This was not the case.

In 2011, the percentage of people who had access to the Internet and cell phones in election-based protest countries was 17 percent and 67 percent, respectively. In countries where protests did not emerge, people had statistically significantly better access to the Internet (37 percent) and better, but statistically insignificant, access to cell phones (76 percent).¹³ Analyzing the effect of cell phones and Internet access on the likelihood of protests between 2006 and 2011, while controlling for other potential causes of the protests that might mask their effect, confirms these findings more generally: better access to cell phones and the Internet was not more likely to make pro-democracy protests arise.¹⁴

Even for those with access to cell phones and the Internet, these technologies were not completely autonomous, and were even used against the protesters. Governments in both Egypt and Tunisia were able to block, at least temporarily, people's access to both cell phones and the Internet during the protests. In Bahrain, the government used Facebook to identify the protesters after the protests were crushed, shaming and arresting them, by posting pictures of anonymous protesters on the web and asking Bahrainis to name them.¹⁵

In Egypt, 84 percent of the people surveyed by the International Republican Institute (IRI) in April 2011 said that the traditional media was the one source of information that they relied on the most about events related to the January 25 Revolution. Word-of-mouth was the second and the third. Only six percent of those polled said that Facebook was the one source that they relied on the most for news about the protests, and less than one percent cited Twitter.¹⁶

Modern technologies, like cell phones and the Internet, clearly offered new and different means to organize protests, but not necessarily superior ones. Old technologies, like word of mouth and the conventional media, still seem to provide adequate means to mobilize protests.

All About the Economy

Multiple factors helped organize and fuel the 2011 protests, but pent-up frustrations finally boiling over, technological revolutions, and foreign

involvement were not the root causes. No, the root cause was something else entirely. While the countries in which the pro-democracy protests occurred were different in many ways, one thing that unites them is the economy. This was a key factor behind the 2011 pro-democracy protests. Although the economy grew in some countries prior to the protests, people failed to reap the benefits of this growth, confronting high rates of inflation and unemployment. This generated significant anger among people for the regimes, which they held responsible for their economic state.

In countries where pro-democracy protests occurred after elections took place in 2011, the rate of inflation in the previous year was nine percent. It was only three percent in countries where these protests did not occur. (The difference is statistically significant at the 0.01-level, according to the t-test.)¹⁷ Similarly, in election-based protest countries, the unemployment rate was twelve percent in the previous year, while it was 10 percent where protests did not occur. Although this difference is not statistically significant, the data for unemployment is much sparser than for inflation, which may explain its lack of significance. Young people and women were the hardest hit in many of these countries and were, not coincidentally, strongly represented among the protesters.¹⁸ According to the International Monetary Organization, in 2011 youth unemployment was about 25 percent in the MENA region. In Tunisia, it increased in 2011 from the previous year by 7 percentage points, and by 3.5 percentage points in Egypt.¹⁹

High levels of unemployment and inflation in these countries generated significant discontent.

The high levels of unemployment and inflation in these countries generated significant discontent within society. This discontent is strongly correlated with the outbreak of these protests. For example, an average of 53 percent of the people in election-based protest countries in 2011 were dissatisfied with their standard of living prior to the protests, while only 41 percent were dissatisfied with it in countries where post-election protests did not occur this year.²⁰ This discontent was observable in the posters, chants, and songs surrounding the protests, which focused

on the economy as well as democracy.

According to Gallup Worldview, people's dissatisfaction with their standard of living in Egypt prior to the 2011 protests was nine percentage points higher than it was leading up to the 2010 elections, and nearly twenty percentage points higher than it was leading up to the 2007 elections. In both Morocco and Tunisia, people's dissatisfaction with their standard of living jumped about fifteen percentage points higher between these countries' last two elections.

This stands in stark contrast to Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where pro-democracy protests did not occur in 2011, despite the fact that neither country holds national elections. In both Qatar and the UAE, people's dissatisfaction with their standard of living was more than half that of most countries where pro-democracy protests occurred in 2011, according to the Gallup Worldview polls.²¹ People have high standards of living in these countries because they do not pay income taxes and they benefit from strong social welfare systems where massive oil wealth offers free or subsidized education, health care, and utilities.

When people are dissatisfied with the state of the economy, and when they blame the government for it, they are less likely to tolerate shortcomings in democracy and more likely to protest.²² However, when the economy is performing well and people are prospering under it, as in the case of the UAE and Qatar, people are less likely to see a need for democracy, since their economic interests are represented well without it. They are also more likely to accept certain undemocratic measures, like lifting term limits and centralizing economic authority under the chief executive, as necessary to keeping the incumbent government in office and running the economy effectively.

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Polls consistently show that people around the world prefer having a strong economy to a strong democracy. In a 2005 Pew Center survey, a majority of those polled in seven out of nine countries surveyed said that a strong economy is more important to them than having a good democracy.²³ Polls in Latin America, East Asia, and the Middle East have found similar results, with large majorities of people in these regions favoring economic development over democracy.²⁴ Even in countries affected by the protests, people have prioritized economic concerns, like wages and home ownership, over living in a democracy. In 2012, more than eighteen months after the Arab Awakenings began, 58 percent of the youth surveyed said that “living in a democratic country” was very important to them, compared to 82 percent who said that “being paid a fair wage” was very important to them and 65 percent who said that “home ownership” was very important to them.²⁵

In periods of high economic growth, authoritarian states, particularly those with vast nationalized oil reserves, can also use their economic wealth to buy off the public's support. For example, oil-rich Saudi Arabia, in an effort seemingly to forestall the spread of Arab Spring protests, promised to increase spending by about \$130 billion over a five-year period to raise salaries for public servants,

create more public-sector jobs, and build half a million new housing units. Similarly, the UAE cut food prices to pre-empt protests in the country's northern regions, where economic development is lower than in the rest of the country.

Polls taken after the protests in Egypt also support the idea that the country's poor economy, rather than its lack of democracy, fuelled the protests. When asked in a 2011 International Republican Institute (IRI) poll about what influenced them to take part in the January 25 protests, 64 percent of Egyptians cited low living standards and unemployment, whereas only nineteen percent said the lack of democracy and political reform. Only six percent cited the events in Tunisia, three percent cited the death of Khaled Saeed, and six percent mentioned the encouragement of friends and family.²⁶

Many scholars have argued that rising wealth, not economic dissatisfaction, caused the pro-democracy protests.²⁷ They claim that wealth produced a highly-educated population and growing middle-class in these countries, groups which value the rights and freedoms that democracy entails and have the means to mobilize action toward these ends. Although the exact numbers are unknown, some of the activists in these countries (like Google executive Wael Ghonim in Egypt) belonged to the middle class, and many of the protesters used middle-class technologies (like cell phones and the Internet) to organize the protests.

However, the idea that the middle class played an important role in organizing the protests is not at odds with the argument presented here. The middle class in many of these countries is also concerned about living standards, inflation, and job security, particularly for those individuals graduating from college without jobs. According to a Booz and Company survey, roughly half of the middle class in Egypt, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia were dissatisfied in 2011 with the state of their national economies and their own standard of living, citing inflation and a lack of job opportunities as important concerns.²⁸

Democratic Concerns May be Fleeting; Economics are Enduring

Many issues around the 2011 protests received more attention than the economy, including the deaths of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia and Khaled Saeed in Egypt, as well as modern technologies including the cell phones and the Internet. These issues, while they may have facilitated the mobilization of the protests, serving as a human symbol to unite people in the case of the former and organize people quickly in the case of the latter, were not the real catalysts of the protests. A much older and deeper issue lay at the heart—the economy. People took to the streets in 2011 in so many places and in such large numbers because they faced severe economic hardships, and they connected their economic state with the autocratic nature of their regimes.

Following the pro-democracy protests in 2011, a number of countries held national elections, bringing new leaders to power in many places. In both Tunisia and Egypt, groups that had been banned under the previous regime won a plurality or more of these countries' legislative seats and captured key political offices. In Libya, which had not held elections in decades, a liberal, secular alliance of parties, which has promised to continue the country's democratic reforms, captured a lion's share of seats in the national assembly.

Overall, though, democratic progress has been conservative since 2011. New elections were not held in Haiti, Nicaragua, or Russia, among others. In Russia, President Putin further curtailed democratic freedoms after the protests by imposing harsh fines on unsanctioned protests and further restricting the operation of NGOs in the country. In Egypt, the military council dismissed the country's democratically-elected legislature and neutered the powers of the presidency.

The protests have created their own economic hardships as well. In the Middle East and North Africa, tourism has dropped drastically. Capital production has declined sharply, and trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) have dried up. These economic effects have reverberated to neighboring countries as well. If they persist, they could lead to further protests and to the hardening of people's anti-government positions.

At the moment, people seem to blame the slow speed of democratic reforms in their countries for the equally slow speed of their countries' economic recovery. With time, however, this could change—people could turn their backs on these transitions if the transitions do not lead to desired economic changes. Thus, ironically, what led to the protests initially—a poorly performing economy—could also contribute to these movements' downfall.

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4. The word "significant" is a statistical term meaning that the results were not produced by chance. In this paper, I use the word "significant" to refer to any statistical findings where the p-value is .05 or lower, as is standard. This p-value indicates that there is a 5 percent or less chance that the results were produced by chance. The tests used to determine the statistical significance varies based on the data.

5. This statement is based on a Chi-squared test—a statistical non-parametric test used to compare observed data with a hypothetical or established distribution that one would expect to obtain according to a specific hypothesis. In this case, the test was based on the difference in a country's Polity Index score between the years 2010 and 2011, and the difference in a country's Polity Index score between elections held in 2011 and the previous election.
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