



Civil Society and Political Transformation in Egypt:

Time to Think Again?

- Alan Fowler

"Why did diplomats, policymakers, analysts and academics fail to see and understand the growing popular unrest in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries?"

"It seems that the reasons why we thought a revolution impossible were wrong, our identification of the agents of change was misguided and our understanding of how collective mobilisation happens was too narrow. We need new ways to capture what is happening on the ground through the eyes of these countries' people."

"Informed by social movement theory about actors, agency and how change happens, we ended up asking the wrong questions as to why the people have risen. In Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, was there an organised social movement? Certainly not: Did they have visible leadership? No. Did they have a massive, or at least significant, following? Not in the conventional sense of a mobilised constituency."

"Our analytical perspectives failed to enable us to 'see like citizens' and understand that people were overcoming barriers of fear and reaching breaking point."

(Mariz Tadros, IDS Bulletin, 7 February, 2011)

With these words at the back of my mind, I visited Cairo in early May at the invitation of Plan International. Here, my work required visits to the city's slums and neglected neighbourhoods. It involved (translated) discussions with young men and women who had been active on the streets during the revolution, listening to the experiences of savings and loan associations run by women, as well as the stories of members of women's literacy groups. The post-

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revolutionary sense of empowerment was strong. The youth made clear that their message to power holders was "listen and hear, or meet us in Tahrir!", the focal point of protest. The regenerative themes drawn by women in the literacy group had,



REFLECT literacy group in Nahadet Khairallah in peri-urban Cairo

I was told, become more assertive in tone and more public centred in terms of their hopes and demands. Through their eyes and stories, the most important gain from all the unrest and violence seemed as much about restoring their dignity as it was about winning freedom.

Why did this political outpouring happen now and not a year back, or a year hence? What is it that we, as observers and analysts of these unanticipated events, missed? Explanations abound about the multiple contributory reasons for revolt: high levels of youth unemployment; rigged elections and an illegitimate regime; endemic corruption; inflated food prices; abuse of human rights with impunity for the abusers; oppression of political parties; playing up fear of an "Islamic threat"; reported regime instigation of sectarian violence and bombings to justify continuation of emergency powers? The list goes on.

What do observers search for in such processes? We look for visible sites and the formal institutions responsible

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for all these issues. We note people's reactions to them in forms that we can understand because they resemble expressions of NGOs and

in real time. This new political space to self-organise seems now to be a reality. Enhancing the capacity of Egyptians to make use of that space

disobedience as the means to achieve the civic ends of a new, non-autocratic political dispensation. A third lesson is to rethink leadership and followership that an upcoming "connected generation" will value and trust because, as Clay Shirky (2008) suggests, beyond the failure of political parties, in the socio-politics of organising, "here comes everybody".

Jeffrey Goldfarb, 2006, *The Politics of Small Things: the Power or Powerlessness in Dark Times*, University of Chicago Press.

One is to look beyond the usual expressions of organised civil society to find the drivers and places of civic energy.

formal civil society organisations with which we are familiar. But what we do not see, or even look for, are what Jeffrey Goldfarb (2006) calls the "politics of the kitchen table". This describes the discussions and struggles of families who function in all walks of life as they make sense of what is happening to and around them, and decide where to invest their energy. Those taking to the streets were not "organised civil society". They were traders fed up with bribing the police. They were office workers from corporations big and small. They were middle-class professionals from many fields alongside factory workers and small-scale subsistence farmers from along the banks of the river Nile. They were the unemployed and unemployable. They were people with disabilities. They were, simply, Egyptian citizens who had, for years, been denied a sense of self-worth, who were collectively fed up enough to overcome fear and *redefine the situation for themselves*, not as the power holders would have them believe it to be.

The process was spontaneous and virtually leaderless. Figureheads came and went but were not legitimated or, it would appear, needed to hold the day and point the way. This "unconventional" revolt was aided and abetted by the technologies behind social networks that can connect multiple sites of leadership

will be a major challenge with a long time frame.

I came away with many lessons. Three stand out for civil society

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researchers. One is to look beyond the usual expressions of organised civil society to find the drivers and places of civic energy. That is, to fully comprehend the organic stuff of power at micro level and its connections. Second is to look for civic energy that is "uncivil" and potentially destabilising. In the case of Egypt, this means working through the paradox of using public

Clay Shirky, 2008, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations*, Penguin, New York.

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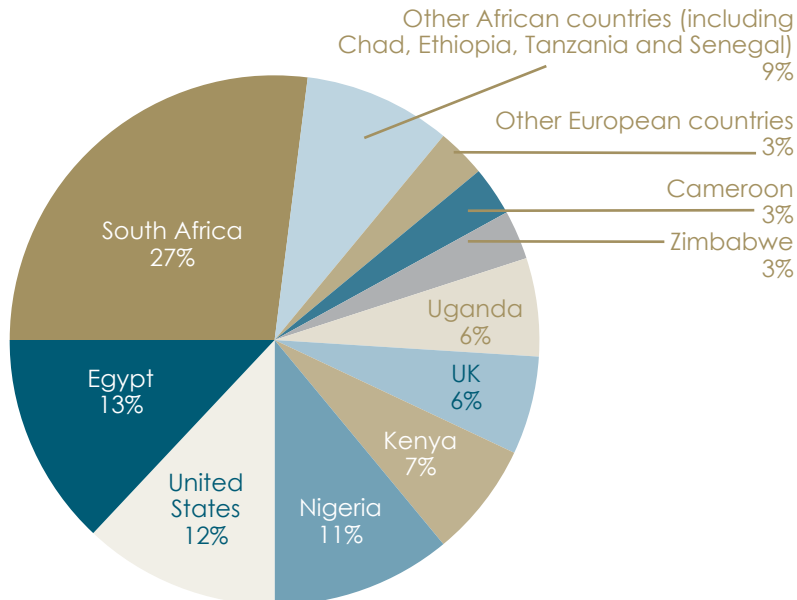
Savings and Loans association in community development area Nahadet Khairallah

ISTR Africa – Who are we?

The countdown to conference begins



We have recently completed an analysis of our database of network members. From a humble start of just over 20 members a year ago, the network has grown fast and, at last count, was approaching 90 members.



With less than three months to go before the much-anticipated ISTR Africa conference on 23–27 August this year, the organising committee is excited to report that it has been overwhelmed by the level of interest in the event. The head of the conference's technical committee, Ebenezer Obadare, reports that he has received more than fifty abstracts. The technical committee hopes to communicate their decisions in the second or third week of June, but has generally been impressed with the quality of the submissions.

Where do ISTR Africa network members reside?

The analysis shows that almost four-fifths (80%) of the network members reside in African countries, with the remaining one-fifth living in Europe and America. Our members come from 13 different African countries, including South Africa, Nigeria, Kenya, Tanzania, Senegal, Uganda, Chad, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt.

Similarly, the group appears to represent a good balance of practitioners and academic researchers, with 63% of network members employed by academic institutions and 37 employed by NGOs.

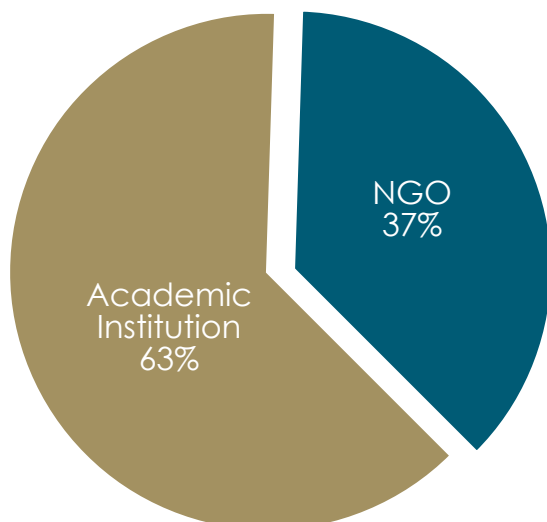
We have also been fortunate enough to receive generous funding for travel grants from the Ford Foundation, Southern Africa Trust and Trust Africa.

Adebayo Olukoshi, the director of the UN African Institute for Economic Development and Planning, will be the keynote speaker at the event. Dr Olukoshi is interested in the politics of economic relations and he was previously Executive Secretary of the Council for Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA).

Prominent civil society scholars Adam Habib from University of Johannesburg; Mark Sidel from University of Iowa College of Law and Alan Fowler from University of KwaZulu Natal will speak at plenary sessions.

We look forward to a productive and stimulating conference at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies. On the 23rd of August we will have a one-day training event led by Alan Fowler to discuss the conceptual and empirical difficulties related to the study of civil society. On the 24th to the 26th of August we will have the three-day conference. On the 27th we will host a one-day workshop on civil society accountability, assessing the success of recent experiments in Uganda and Kenya.

ISTR Africa network members by type of employer

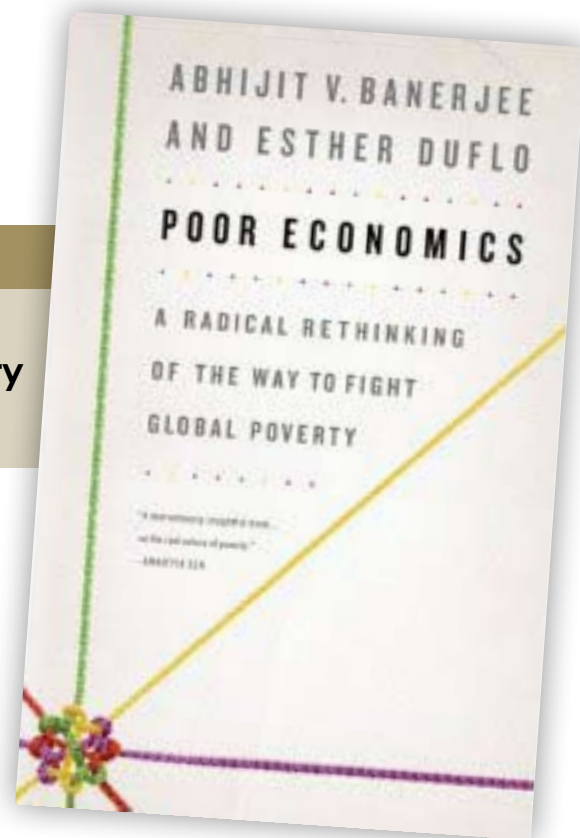


We also asked network members about their areas of specialisation and expertise. We found that the most popular words respondents used to characterise their work were “democracy”, “governance” and “development”. These words appeared in one-third of members' free format descriptions of their research interests. In contrast, we found that just more than 10% of respondents refer to “poverty” and slightly over 5% mention “social movements”.

BOOK REVIEW BY NICHOLAS SPAULL

POOR ECONOMICS A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty

By Abhijit V. Banerjee and Esther Duflo



The Gospel according to Banerjee and Duflo

In their latest book, *Poor Economics*, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo present a highly readable overview of the problems facing the world's poor, as well as the most effective ways of overcoming those problems. The book covers the usual suspects of poverty research (health, education, nutrition, family size, and financial access), and provides an overview of the findings from Randomised Control Trials. It reads as a non-technical summary of their research over the past two decades and is completely free of economic jargon and theoretical grand-standing, making the book accessible to non-economists.

Those more familiar with RCT research will find the countless stories and anecdotes enlightening and informative. By painting a nuanced picture of the lives and choices of the poor, we are better able to understand the sometimes elusive logic that drives households, families and individuals to make the choices they do.

Yet it must be said that although the book is filled with colourful vignettes and moving anecdotes, the authors do not base their recommendations on a few personal encounters, as is so often the case in qualitative research. Rather, they use the

anecdotes as emotionally pleasing poster-boys for the less palatable RCTs that litter the end-notes of every chapter and convince the reader that this is all based on highly legitimate stuff.

One of the lasting motifs of the book is the humanisation of the poor. By placing their evidence in the wider sociological context that poor people inhabit, we begin to see that, while their world is vastly different from our own, the contradictions and complexities inherent in all human behaviour are no less prevalent among the poor.

Another notable feature of the book is the companion website (www.pooreconomics.com). The site provides downloadable data for every chapter of the book, as well as data visualisations and extensive references and research links. There is an entire section devoted to "Teaching the book", which provides lecture notes, problem sets, podcasts and assignments for every chapter. Keeping in step with the pragmatic ethos of the book, the website's "What you can do" section has links to a number of organisations involved in various projects around the world.

In their concluding chapter, the authors highlight "five key lessons" which emerge from their research.

Background

Banerjee and Duflo are both highly decorated economists from MIT and well regarded in both academic and policy circles. In 2003, they cofounded the Abul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), which aims to 'reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is based on scientific evidence'. Their method of choice is using Randomised Control Trials (RCTs) to test the impact of an intervention. In the same way that a medical trial would test the impact of a drug by randomly assigning individuals to an experiment group (who receive the drug) or a control group (who receive a placebo), RCTs in the social sciences test the impact of interventions such as increased textbook provision, or free immunisation. In much the same fashion as the medical experiment, individuals or villages are assigned to an experiment group (receive additional textbooks) or a control group (no additional textbooks) and the outcomes are compared. As the authors explain: "Since the individuals assigned to different treatments are exactly comparable (because they were chosen at random), any difference between them is the effect of the treatment".

The classification is both interesting and informative:

1) Information deficiency – the poor often lack information, such as the benefits of immunisation and early education, or the higher HIV prevalence among older men.

2) Lack of access – they lack access to financial products such as savings and retirement accounts, as well as medically enhanced products like chlorinated water, iodised salt and fortified cereals, all of which could substantially improve their lives.

3) Missing Markets – Although there are success stories of markets emerging to meet the needs of the poor (micro credit, for one), many times the conditions for a market to emerge on its own are simply not there. This deprives the poor of services that would enhance their lives, especially health insurance and no-frills savings accounts.

4) The three Is: Rather than predatory elites, the Ideology, Ignorance, and Inertia of experts, aid workers and local policy makers often explain why policies fail and why aid does not have the desired effect. Rather

than continually pointing to abstract conspiracy theories that are difficult to prove, we should focus on the errors we know we are making.

5) Incorrect expectations – the poor often do not know what they are entitled to from local government, as the authors conclude: "Politicians, whom no one expects to perform, have no incentive to try improving people's lives". Furthermore, low expectations of their own capabilities, as well as their children's educational capabilities, become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Throughout the book, the authors highlight what solutions have worked in the past and why. They make numerous thoughtful proposals about the way forward but their most valuable contribution is their pragmatism in tackling the global problem of poverty. Although there are institutional deficiencies in many developing countries, these do not negate the possibility of improving governance and policy, they argue. Indeed, their research shows that improvements can be made in spite of these institutional deficits. Thoughtful policies that nudge people

in the right direction can have large impacts: "We may not have much to say about macroeconomic policies or institutional reform, but don't let the modesty of the enterprise fool you: Small changes can have big effects".

After removing the straitjacket of academic formality, Banerjee and Duflo provide a flowing and detailed portrait of the lives of poor people. They are content to confine their world-class research methods and award-winning techniques to the end-notes of the book and instead give centre stage to the problem at hand: global poverty. This combination of technical rigour, readability and pragmatism is likely to make this book a classic in development economics literature. By moving beyond platitudes and ideological dogmas, they show us that a small group of thoughtful, committed researchers can change the way we look at poverty, and hopefully, the way to eradicate it.

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Did critics uncork the Champagne bottle a little too early on the Arab protests?

- Jacob Mwathi Mati

Much ink has been used recently in writing commentaries on the vortex of uprisings in the Arab world. Starting as spontaneous reactions to the self-immolation of the Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, these uprisings were reactions to long-standing social and economic grievances of the masses against the ruling elite. The fall of the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt in quick succession as a result of the power of politics on the street, and the speed with which such mass demonstrations and revolts spread to the rest of the Middle East and North Africa, left many political regimes shaken.

Five months since the fall of the Tunisian regime, questions are emerging regarding whether the much-celebrated "Arab Spring" was not a façade. Was there really "a revolution" in Tunisia and Egypt? "Post-revolution" events in these two countries, as well as the ongoing

ill-intentioned attempts by NATO to sustain a civil war in Libya under the false pretense of "protecting the Libyan people", suggest that the so-called "revolutions" have been far from transformative. Instead, they are turning out to be iterations of regime change. These developments

point to limitations in the power of the people in transforming the state, specifically in Tunisia and Egypt, but more fundamentally in a peaceful overthrow of Gaddafi's regime in Libya.

While the reasons for these outcomes

are many and contested, I advance two that hinge on Gramsci's concept of hegemony. Hegemony in the Gramscian sense helps explain how the old order in Tunisia and Egypt has refused to die. But it also explains the possibilities for a new order to be born. The first reason, I argue, is the illusion of a revolution among both protesters and commentators. The second is the political interests of Western powers, who appear benevolent and supportive of the popular course while covertly undermining the will of the Arab people.

Regarding the first of these reasons, it is instructive to note that the so-called "new regimes" in both Tunisia and Egypt have included influential figures of the old regimes. In the case of Tunisia, a fragile coalition crafted to run the country in the interim is a product of elite bargains that may not necessarily result in great change. The situation in Egypt is even more poignant, as it is slowly reflecting a scenario where one Mubarak is being replaced with a council of many Mubaraks. For Egypt, this is not the first time that outpourings of protest have resulted in regime changes. In 1952, protests by thousands of young Egyptians precipitated the young officers' coup against King Farouk. Since then, the army has remained the hegemonic political force firmly embedded in the Egyptian political fabric, determining who runs the government through outright dictatorship or competitive dictatorships following shambolic elections. Replacing Mubarak with a military supreme council translates to continuity of this hegemonic role of the army in Egyptian politics, as leaders of the protest movements have been excluded from the running of the state in the interim. The important question remains: are we likely to see new waves of mass protests when Egyptians realise that nothing much has changed? Yes, people will continue to agitate and this is likely to result from the army's attempts to embalm the dethroned Mubarak. Nonetheless, it is highly

unlikely that we will again see mass outpourings of a magnitude seen in early February. This is due to fatigue of the protestors and, more so, because of the palliative measures that the army continues to take in placating the people.

To comprehend the second reason why radical transformation may never come to pass, the words of

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John Quincy Adams aptly capture the role the US and her NATO allies play in the political games in the region: "America does not go abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own". Some Western critics have gone into overdrive in dismissing the revolutions as pointing to the illiberal attitudes of the "new regimes", and lobbying for the Obama administration to ensure that the US does not lose its hegemonic status in the region. The aim is to ensure that whoever comes into power in the ongoing civil war in Libya, as well as across the Red Sea in Yemen and in the broader region, is firmly tethered to the West. It is indeed because of this self-interest that the US has been complicit in killing or neutering any progressive uprisings throughout the world. In this regard, oil and geopolitical strategic interests are important explanatory factors for the interventions of the US and NATO in Libya compared to their deafening silences, or mere condemnations,

in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, where the force used by the regimes against peaceful demonstrators has been equally as brutal.

It will be interesting to see what happens in Libya after Gaddafi. Might Libya turn out to be another Iraq or Somalia? I argue that it may well be. The longer Gaddafi's autocracy lives, while his latter-day political competitors – former allies turned foes – continue to drink from the poisoned chalices that the West freely hands to them in the name of protecting the Libyan people, the greater the likelihood of extremism nationalism taking root. This is already happening in Yemen, where the ongoing counter-hegemonic wars have wrestled control of the popular struggle from the peaceful non-violent protest movement in favour of Al Qaeda. It would be a sad day for democracy were such forces to master the critical mass and attempt to turn these states into theocracies, as this is a certain way to create new fronts for the so-called "War on Terror".

Despite the challenges, I propose that reforms will continue in the Middle East, albeit in most instances, in slow and measured steps. People are definitely likely to go back to the streets to protest against that which they deem too oppressive. But, at the moment, the tide seems to have turned against the emergent social movements because the congruence of hegemonic powers (local and global) have conspired to ensure that real transformation of the Arab state does not happen. If the popular will is ever to become the hegemonic force, it needs to guard against elite bargains, at the same time being careful of the supposed benevolent support of the West.

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Theme for 2011

Under the overarching slogan, "Acting Together for a Just World", the 2011 World Assembly theme is '**Civil Society and Global Decision-Making: Doing it Better.**'

The impact of issues like human rights, climate justice, development effectiveness, women's rights and labour rights is felt at the local level. Yet, more and more frequently, policy decisions are being made at the global level. Populated by governments, multi-lateral institutions, multinational corporations and large international NGOs and civil society organisations, there are voices missing from this decision-making arena: those of the local people and grassroots organisations who most need to be heard. Particularly important are the voices of women, indigenous people and young people.

Highlights: 2010 World Assembly

- 542 delegates at the World Assembly (52% women) including 62 Youth Assembly delegates
- 94 countries represented with 32% delegates from developing countries
- 133 panellists, workshop facilitators and speakers
- 3 plenary sessions on Economic Justice, Development Effectiveness and Climate Justice
- 2 live radio broadcasts of BBC's World Have Your Say from the Youth and World Assemblies
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