

The Enigma of the Arab Uprisings

MARWAN M. KRAIDY

Seven years after their onset, the Arab uprisings continue to be a puzzle. The wave of popular protests that started in Tunisia before spreading to Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, and Yemen stoked the hopes of many citizens of those countries and caught the global imagination. Today, however, the situation is bleak. Tunisia appears to be following a pattern of two steps forward and three steps back. Bahrain languishes in the grip of continued repression. Egypt suffocates under a heavy-handed police state. Syria reels from an ultra-violent proxy war that has left most of its cities in rubble, killed hundreds of thousands, and displaced millions. Yemen has been ravaged by a devastating Saudi-led and US-supported air war.

With widespread desolation following fervent hope, it is inevitable that we ask: Why have revolutionaries failed to take power? How did the counterrevolutions' attempt to bring back the status quo ante lapse into protracted violence and chaos?

Scholars have disagreed on whether the protest movements collectively known as the Arab Spring can be characterized as revolutions. Although the term has been widely used, skeptics argue that real revolutions produce radical transformation: they excise incumbent regimes and replace them with different leaders, new constitutions, and fundamentally altered relations between rulers and ruled. Since most protest movements of the past decade failed to replace regimes even as they toppled leaders, they do not rise to the level of revolution.

Asef Bayat, a sociologist at the University of Illinois, is a proponent of this view. In *Revolution without Revolutionaries*, a theoretically rich and contextually grounded exploration of the Arab uprisings (with half of the chapters drawing heavily

on essays published during, and in one case before, these events), Bayat reprises an argument he has developed in his previous publications. By the time the uprisings started in late 2010, Marxism-Leninism, anticolonial nationalism, and Islamism, the dominant revolutionary paradigms of the twentieth century, had all faded away. They had been supplanted by neoliberalism, an increasingly prevalent ideology that subjects all human relations to market logic. When the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze in the act that

sparked the Tunisian uprising, neoliberal ideology had permeated Arab societies so deeply that activists lacked the tools to enunciate a radical agenda and seize power to implement it, Bayat argues. Rather than focusing on economic redistribution and overturning existing ideologies, aspiring revolutionaries were caught in discourses of rights and identity. The main impulse of the uprisings, for Bayat, was reformist, seeking gradual tweaks to the system rather than toppling it altogether, and in his view this was why they failed.

Bayat provides a convincing overall conceptual framework for aborted revolutions, in which pervasive market ideology acts both as the root cause of dissent and as the main obstacle to an uprising's success. Starting in the 1980s, oligarchical regimes restructured Arab economies with support from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They ended or cut subsidies for staple foods, privatized entire industries and transferred their ownership to regime cronies, lowered tariffs and protections from foreign competition, and reneged on the provision of adequate housing. Others, like Gilbert Achcar in his 2013 book *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, have claimed that neoliberal economics are at the root of the revolts. But unlike Achcar, Bayat also sees neoliberalism as a catalyst for social contention.

By the time Arabs rose up, the Arab elite and its Western backers had established neoliberalism

Revolution without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring

by Asef Bayat

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MARWAN M. KRAIDY is a professor of global media, politics, and culture at the University of Pennsylvania. His latest book is *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (Harvard University Press, 2016).

as common sense, and the populace had internalized that ideology to the extent that most people lacked a basic ability to consider alternative ways of thinking and being. In Bayat's view, this state of affairs sapped radical political energies even while it led to new forms of protest.

SPACE AND TIME

One variant of protest is found in the everyday urban practices of encroachment onto public space, which Bayat calls the "city inside out." The urban poor poach bits of public space by spilling their private activities onto alleys, streets, and squares. Facing state-backed commercial developers and their gated enclaves' "accumulation by dispossession," the poor fight back by resorting to "survival by repossession." By carrying the sentiments and opinions of their everyday routines into public space, Bayat concludes, the urban underclass make the street political—but this does not necessarily lead them to participate in revolutionary action.

Bayat builds on his previous thinking on urban geography, developed in his 2010 book *Life as Politics*, and continues to draw on his deep empirical knowledge of Iran and Egypt. In *Revolution without Revolutionaries* he argues that the poor recreate village-like social structures in city neighborhoods, where urban anonymity mixes with quasi-rural social surveillance and intimacy. But Bayat cautions against stressing the spatial aspects of urban dissent and neglecting its temporal dimensions: the latter are "typically ad hoc, exceptional, and liminal."

Bayat's warning against overemphasizing space is spot on, but his argument raises questions about how organized protest actions may work symbiotically with what he calls urban "non-movements." Reading the book, one wonders: Did labor activism, as seen in the Tunisian miners' strike in Gafsa and Egyptian textile workers' protests in Mahalla al-Kubra, which preceded the revolutions by years, or even organized social groups like soccer ultras, not carry over into the Arab uprisings of 2011? Were we to consider the interaction between intermittent everyday encroachment and longer-term organized activism, we might reach conclusions different from Bayat's about the nature of urban dissent in Tahrir Square and on Avenue Bourguiba. Rather than

a string of ad hoc moments that fail to culminate in a successful and strictly defined revolution, we may better comprehend the Arab uprisings as public explosions of dissent that had been bubbling under the surface, born of the interaction of quiet practices of urban encroachment in peripheral streets with organized social movements unfolding in central urban spaces.

This bears on how we define "revolution," a central issue for Bayat, who casts the Arab uprisings as "refolutions," combining the radical impetus of "revolution" with the gradualist sensibility of "reform." Like most neologisms, "refolution" is clunky. Besides, must "revolution" be an either-or binary? Can we not think of it as a spectrum of revolutionary processes that includes various imperfect and inconclusive specimens of the phenomenon? As the Lebanese sociologist Fawwaz Traboulsi put it in 2014 in an Arabic-language book itself titled *Revolutions without Revolutionaries*, "[T]here is a prevalent school on revolution . . . if it does not like a revolution's

path and actors, it denies it the label of revolution . . . and announces the fall of revolutions, their accomplishments, and their promises." Revolutions have variable time spans: some overthrow incumbents within months, others may take much

longer or peter out gradually. Whether a revolt is deemed to have risen to the level of "revolution" may depend on when we are making that judgment.

VIGNETTES OF PROTEST

Although Bayat's book is impressively sweeping in its themes, it sacrifices depth for breadth. Except for a chapter on the Iranian revolution, there are no probing case studies, no critical examples woven through the analysis. Briefly mentioned examples are scattered after long analytical exposés. Some examples are incongruent: a discussion of the urban poor's practices of repossessing space is followed by scenes of Saudi women driving, sitting in street cafés, and visiting art galleries—a vignette of upper-middle-class life rather than that of the urban underclass. This may be due to the overall concern with macro-structures, or to the fact that the book is a collection of essays: they are engrossing individually, but as a whole it sprawls with redundancies.

Bayat's implicit rejection of the centrality of digital media in the uprisings is refreshing, since

Activists lacked the tools to enunciate a radical agenda.

so much has been written about social media's role in the uprisings, but his claims about culture and communication are not fully worked out. He states the importance of "cultural reproduction" and "symbolic utterances," but scarcely illustrates how they work. His discernment of "passive networks . . . instantaneous communications between atomized individuals that are established by tacit recognition of their commonalities and are mediated through real or virtual space" is tantalizing, but he stops short of elaborating. Explanation is important here because symbol- and meaning-making practices are particularly crucial for Bayat's "nonmovements," which he defines as "shared contentious practices of a large number of fragmented people whose similar but disconnected claims produce important social change." This rudimentary treatment of meaning-making practices is a missed opportunity, though it is an inevitable consequence of the book's focus on the structures of power.

Because of its focus on urban space as an arena of power and resistance, the book might have benefited from a more sustained discussion of the role of women. Women have been central to revolutions past and present. If revolutions against autocracies are about redistributing sovereign power

to citizens, women ought to be more central to the analysis since they are still second-class citizens in many parts of the world. In Egypt and Tunisia, women were repeatedly catalysts for protests. Although some are mentioned briefly, the sexual harassment epidemic in Egypt is particularly important in light of the book's focus on the everyday repossession of urban space. A more vigorous and systematic exploration of gender variation in urban encroachment practices would have been extremely valuable.

Such drawbacks notwithstanding, this is still a laudable book: it deploys a distinctive analytical approach that yields a compelling narrative of the Arab uprisings. The volume will be particularly useful to readers new to Bayat's work, since it offers a cumulative presentation of his signature notions of post-Islamism, nonmovements, and "refolution," in addition to his focus on urban space. *Revolution without Revolutionaries* provides an important sociological analysis of the macrostructures of power and resistance in the Arab uprisings, and offers insights useful to the study of forms of popular protest worldwide, whether or not they succeed as a revolution. But it may be too soon for any theory to explain the enigma of the Arab Spring. ■