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CHAPTER 1

THE PEOPLE WANT

Who were the "people" who wanted the overthrow of their regime?

The word *sha'b* is particularly resonant in modern Arabic. Indeed, it is one of the most powerful and layered words in the contemporary political vocabulary. Its Qur'anic antecedents stem from a famous verse (49:13): "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another." The "peoples" (*shu'ub*) of the verse are plural. In contrast, the "people" of the modern Arabic *sha'b* is singular—and takes a singular verb.

The modern resonance of the Arabic word for "people" lies in Arab nationalism, an intellectual and social movement with origins in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This movement posited the existence of an identifiable Arab nation, made up (in its grandest reach) of all Arabic speakers from Morocco in the west to Iraq in the east. Sometimes this body was characterized as the "Arab people" (*al-sha'b al-'arabi*), sometimes as the "Arab peoples" (*al-shu'ub al-'arabiya*).[1] For that people or community of peoples, hitherto unknown to history under a single unified term, Arab nationalism prescribed a nation—and ideally, a single, overarching nation-state.

The dream of a single Arab nation-state never came to pass. From the end of World War I and the Versailles peace treaty forward, the trope of the Arab people or peoples has always been reflected through the existence of multiple states that shared and contested the self-description and sometimes the political appellation "Arab." Thus the citizens of the individual states of the Arabic-speaking world might describe themselves as the people of Egypt or Syria or Tunisia, while simultaneously continuing to think of themselves as part of a greater Arab nation.

It is significant that the "people" of the chants that began in January 2011 were not subdesignated by the states to which they belonged (as in, "the Tunisian people want") or explicitly named as "Arab" (as in, "the Arab people want"). From a literary standpoint, the explanation may be that the chant was borrowed from a poem by the Tunisian author Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, which begins (rendered literally), "If some day the people wanted life."[2] It is also true that the phrase scanned well in Arabic without the added syllables of a national or pan-national designation.

But it is also worth noting that, within a short time of the initial Tunisian protests against the Ben Ali regime, the term "Arab" in the phrase "Arab spring" was identifiably if not deliberately dual. On the one hand, Tunisians and then Egyptians, Syrians, Libyans, and so forth were demanding change in their own particular countries. When they called themselves "the people," they were speaking as citizens of the states they constituted. On the other hand, by self-consciously echoing the claims of other Arabic-speaking protesters in other countries, the chanters were suggesting that a broader people—implicitly, the Arab people or peoples—were seeking change from the regime or regimes (more on this shortly) that were governing them.

The fact that the people were seeking change first of all in their own countries reflected the institutional realities of Middle

Eastern states in the early 2010s. Although different actors in different Arabic-speaking states were often politically entwined, none was fully interdependent: to call for change in one country was not necessarily to call for change elsewhere, or everywhere. In the first instance, chanting Tunisians wanted Ben Ali out, Egyptians wanted Mubarak to go, and Syrians wanted to rid themselves of Bashar.

It is a crucially important fact of the Arab spring and its aftermath that the distinctive institutional arrangements, politics, and demographics of individual countries operated more or less on their own—and produced drastically divergent outcomes. Egypt and Syria and Tunisia look radically different from one another today because they were different countries, whose differences outweighed their similarities when it came to the realities of change. The same is also true of Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and the other countries where the Arab spring had important effects.[3]

Yet the broader, pan-Arab national aspect of the call to change also must not be minimized or gainsaid. For one thing, very early in 2011, the movement that seemed to be spreading from country to country came to be called the *Arab* spring. It manifested itself to one degree or another in essentially every Arabic-speaking country, including those where it had little to no chance of making a substantial impact, such as Saudi Arabia. And it did not spread to non-Arabic-speaking countries in the region, such as Turkey and Iran, which have experienced separate and distinct protest movements of their own on their own very different timing.*

* Israel is, as usual, a complicated partial exception. The timing of the "social justice" protests that began there in July 2011 clearly had *something* to do with the Arab spring. The protesters' identification of social justice echoed Arab spring protesters' chant for "freedom, dignity, and social justice." Yet the Israeli protests notably did not call for the "overthrow of the regime." They followed hard on the huge

That is no coincidence. The phenomenon of the Arab spring turned out to be distinctively and uniquely Arab in scope. By extension, the protesters' repeated invocation of the "people" in different places implied a transnational Arab identity, or if you prefer, a broader Arab nationalism that connected the Arab "peoples" to one another. Each of the groups of people in different countries chanted the same Arabic slogan referring to the "people"—using the same resonant words, in the same language, transcending different dialects.[4] Other slogans were also shared, to be sure, sometimes in the same words, sometimes with variations. But the slogan asserting peoplehood distinctively stands for the iterative, shared, cross-border process of diffusion, imitation, and common identification.

The contagion of the protests from one Arabic-speaking country to another was also at the same time the product of Arabic media, especially satellite news stations like Al Jazeera. Those stations not only broadcast across borders but, by doing so, have maintained and transformed the ideas and rhetoric of Arab peoplehood. In the discursive space of pan-Arab media, the Arab "peoples" are encouraged, consciously and unconsciously, to participate in common experiences and aspirations. The Al Jazeera phenomenon of common identification across borders, shaped by language and culture, previously had been the subject of much academic discussion.[5] But it had never before been demonstrated through actual political action, repeated across borders in the performance of a script that was learned in the

anti-austerity protests that took place across Spain beginning on May 15, 2011, and continuing into the summer. And when the Occupy movement began to draw attention in September 2011 in New York, the Israeli protest movement began to resemble that movement far more than the Arab spring protests. Compare Daniel Monterescu and Noa Shaindlinger, "Situational Radicalism: The Israeli 'Arab Spring' and the (Un)Making of the Rebel City," *Constellations*, February 26, 2013.

first instance through satellite television, if supplemented by the Internet and emergent social media.[6]

Having identified the complexity of the correct level to identify "people" protesting, however, does not resolve the question of who the people were. Rather, it opens a deeper, more fundamental aspect of the same question. When some people form a group and take to the streets and claim to be *the* people, are they? What if the group has no single, stable membership? How many protesters does it take for us to begin to think that "the people" is speaking? Are numbers part of the answer at all?

In approaching this delicate and important question, it is useful to distinguish two different methods of approaching it, which will in turn yield two different kinds of answers. One is historical, sociological, and descriptive. The other is political, philosophical, and normative.

The historical approach begins with the background assumption that "the people" is an abstraction, not a concrete object. The historian Edmund Morgan's classic account of the rise of the idea of popular sovereignty in England and America is called *Inventing the People*.[7] The title more or less sums it up: the "people" do not exist as a natural fact. They and their capacity to act collectively must be invented.

Seen from this perspective, it can never be historically accurate to say that "the people" were gathered in a public square to demand change. To the contrary, as a historical-descriptive matter, there are only individuals and groups *claiming* to speak in the name of the people or on their behalf. Even if every single citizen of the country turned out to chant, the citizens' claim to be the people would still be an abstraction rather than historical reality. The artifact to be studied is the claim to representative peoplehood—and the human beings, existing in that time and space, who make it.[8]

A related descriptive way to look at the question, one that draws on literary and cultural theory, is to say that individuals and groups like those who gathered in the Arab spring are engaged in a *performance* of peoplehood.[9] This approach depicts the actors as undertaking certain actions and saying certain words that are both familiar and ever-changing. Background cultural beliefs and collective memories function like scripts that enable the acts and words to create what the participants understand as speaking for the "people."*

In addressing recent events, this descriptive approach would turn to sociologists in order to figure out who were the specific people chanting that "the people" wanted the overthrow of the regime—and to cultural and literary historians to understand what they were thinking when they did so. The sociologists would be prepared to draw on all the tools available to make sense of contemporaneous events: not only news reports but data drawn from social media, film, surveys, mobile phone providers, and interviews. If police and intelligence archives eventually open, those might also provide rich sources of exploration for future historians. The goal of the inquiry would be to find particular individuals and then generalize about them—to find out not only who, exactly, joined protests but also what *kinds* of people they were, categorized by class, sex and gender, religious and ethnic denomination and viewpoints, and of course political beliefs and attitudes.

It must be said that answering these sociological questions for, say, Egypt, Syria, and Tunisia is extremely challenging—despite

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* It is possible for this literary-cultural approach to be deployed in a normative vein, not only descriptively. But for my purposes I will classify it here with the descriptive side of the divide because most theorists of performativity are skeptical of normative-philosophical claims about things like peoplehood.

the fact that these events occurred in the past decade and that many of the participants are still alive and able to speak. Historians of the French Revolution, who have grappled with similar questions when seeking to understand different actors who claimed to speak in the name of the people, face what is in certain ways a far more technically challenging problem, since the people in question are long dead and records are incomplete.[10] Knowing who, exactly, stormed the Bastille is notoriously difficult. Yet the very multitude of sources available to us in considering contemporaneous events makes the challenge of determining who protested during the Arab spring almost as hard. The sheer quantity of data makes it difficult to justify generalizations. And if the sociologists do try to generalize, we can be sure that some people who were participants in the events will talk back and tell them they are wrong—a problem that historians of the eighteenth century do not face.

Nevertheless, we can try our best to apply the historical-sociological approach to the Arab spring and what followed. In doing so, we have to consider the changing composition of crowds and the competing claims of protesters in different waves, especially in Egypt. We have to let certain representative views or voices stand in as shorthand for others, running the risk of error and misrepresentation in doing so. Yet some such analysis seems to me necessary to discussing the events of the Arab spring and their aftermath. It would be frustrating and to a degree irrelevant if we were to consider the dramatic arc of the story solely from the point of view of abstractions.

Applying literary and cultural-historical approaches to the Arab spring is also challenging in its own way. The slogans chanted by the protesters can offer us tantalizing textual markers of their ideas. The size and timing of the protests—political-cultural happenings aimed to change the world—also cry out

to be interpreted, almost as if these, too, were texts. It is impossible to engage the Arab spring seriously without trying to place these words and acts in the context of history, politics, and meaning-making in the Arabic-speaking world over the past century or more. At the same time, the work of interpretation is inevitably incomplete and necessarily affected by our own commitments, beliefs, and values.

For these reasons, and others, it is therefore also worth considering a different, alternative method of addressing the question, one rooted in normative theories of politics and philosophy. This approach begins with a different presupposition than the historical-descriptive. It assumes that, under some circumstances, it does make sense to talk about the people and what they want. The people, after all, are the demos in democracy. "The rule of the people" is only a coherent description of a form of government if it is possible to speak about "the people" governing themselves. Similarly, if we want to criticize autocracy or other unattractive forms of government, we must be able to describe who rules in them in some relation to the rule of the people.

Political theorists, the philosophers who make it their business to talk about government, are perfectly aware of historians' distrust of their categories. But they are not deterred—because what they are after is something different from simple description. Political theory asks: What is the right way to govern? This normative question, focused on what ought to be done and answered in terms of good and bad, cannot be answered purely by positive, factual analysis. It requires norms and values. And to get at norms and values, we need precisely the abstractions that historians like to break down.

Thus, a political theorist asking who were the people seeking political change wants to know primarily whether those individuals had a *convincing* or *legitimate* claim to speak on behalf of the

rest of the population of citizens. Raw numbers or other empiri-
cal facts may contribute to a normative analysis of what counts
as genuine representativeness. But the numbers and demograph-
ics alone will never be enough. They must be processed through
a normative framework.

That framework is what allows us to ask not only what hap-
pened in the Arab spring and its aftermath but also what we
should think about. It allows us to evaluate political develop-
ments in the light of justice and well-being. Without it, we could
not make a judgment distinguishing the good of constitutional
democracy in Tunisia from the circularity of Egypt or the evils
of brutal civil war in Syria. Historians, of course, make such
evaluative judgments all the time—mostly without admitting
it. But the real basis for their judgments is often their own
implicit political theory.

In what follows, I am going to make lots of judgments—and
try to argue for them. A grand history of the trajectory from Arab
spring to Arab winter will be desirable in the future. But the
events are too close in time for such a history. Besides, I would
not be the right person to write it. I am too bound up in my own
contemporaneous attempts to understand what has been hap-
pening to judge events. I am also too concerned about the
post-winter future to adopt the disinterested attitude that would
be required to seek after historical objectivity, that unattainable
goal historians pursue despite knowing it can never be reached.

Given these circumstances, I am going to combine history and
philosophy, empirical analysis and normative judgment. I will
try when possible to say which I am doing. But that is also not
a perfectly attainable goal because the categories can run to-
gether. I care about who were "the people" claiming to be the
people. I also care about how peoplehood matters for judging
their claims, achievements, and failures.

Want—and Will

"The people want." In Arabic, as noted, the collective noun takes the singular verb. If it did not sound awkward in English I would translate it as "the people wants." It is noteworthy that in American English, some collective nouns do take singular verbs. Americans would not pause for a moment at the formulation "the team wants"—even though British English mandates the plural verb for the collective noun pretty much universally. Why "people" retains its verbal plurality in American English is an intriguing topic that might not be completely digressive—especially if the reason has to do with "We the People" of the U.S. Constitution who, according to the verbs in the preamble, take plural verbs ("do ordain and establish"). For our purposes, it should be enough to emphasize that, grammatically speaking, the *sha'b* expresses itself with a singular voice.

The Arabic verb *yurid* comes with its own linguistic heritage. In addition to "want," it also means wish, desire, or plan. The noun form of the verb is *irada*, which in medieval Arabic signifies will, especially the divine Will or that of a ruler. Translated into formal political theory terms, the chant might reasonably be interpreted as "the people *will* the overthrow of the regime." Indeed, some English translations of the Shabbi poem mentioned earlier render the same verb as "will."

"Will" as opposed to "want" matters—because it immediately suggests that the chant refers to "the will of the people" (*iradat al-sha'b*).[11] And in the political theory of the modern era, at least from Rousseau and the *volonté générale* onward, the will of the people stands for the core intellectual content of democracy: the idea that the will of the people should determine the form of government and the identity of the governors.[12]

Popular will is thus deeply intertwined with the related idea of popular sovereignty. By invoking the one, the Arab spring protesters were compactly suggesting that they were undertaking to introduce the other. In the face of sovereignty exercised by autocratic governments that (in many cases) purported to speak in the name of the people, the "people" were purporting to speak for themselves.

Taken in this sense, "the people want the overthrow of the regime" comes to sound like a declaration of the popular will to take government out of the hands of the governors and transfer it into the hands of the people and the representatives they would subsequently choose. In terms of political theory, this rationale sounds very much like the theory of the right to self-determination. A group of people—leave aside the question of exactly who they are—claims the right to engage in the formative act of self-government. In the instances of Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, there was no implied claim to be constituting a new *nation* deserving of recognition. Rather, the claim was that the "people" were exercising their right to self-determination by taking power from the existing government and reassigning it.

The historian-sociologist would immediately want to ask who was making this grand claim on behalf of the "people." But from the standpoint of political theory, the most pressing question is whether the claim was legitimate and correct. And here it seems important to note that most democratic political theory strongly supports the idea that the people may legitimately seize power from unjust and undemocratic rulers. Indeed, such an exercise of what may be termed the right to revolution is very close to the central pillar of democratic theory itself.

The basic idea, derived most importantly from the work of John Locke in his *Second Treatise of Government*,[13] is that

legitimate government originates in the consent of the governed and is limited by the individual's incapacity to delegate unalienable rights to anyone else. Under this framework, government that is not derived from consent (whether actual or hypothetical), and that fails to recognize basic rights, loses its legitimacy and may justifiably be replaced. Looking at the autocratic presidential republics of the Arab world (I do not speak of the monarchies), it was difficult to escape the conclusion that Lockean conditions of consent and respect for basic rights had been grossly violated. Thus, a right to revolution must have existed in those countries, if it ever exists anywhere.

This brings us back around to the normative question of whether the protesters in these countries should be understood to have acted on behalf of "the people." Seen from a broadly Lockean democratic perspective, it arguably does not matter that the protesters were not elected and may not have been representative of the broader public from the standpoint of demographics or political preferences. The protesters were nonetheless right—right to say that the government was illegitimate, and therefore right to call for something else *in the name of the people.*

To determine if you share this normative, philosophical intuition, ask yourself: What did you think or feel when you first learned of the crowds gathering in Tunisia, Egypt, and beyond? Did you feel uplifted, sympathetic, moved? Did you believe that the governments against which they were rising were illegitimate and oppressive?

If your answer is yes, then (I want to argue) you share a basic commitment to the value and meaning of popular democratic political action. To have had that feeling of sympathy, one had to have believed that the existing governments were bad and illegitimate and that the people had the right to replace them.

Although it is not necessary for my argument, I would also speculate that on close introspection, nearly everyone reading these words shares some version of this belief—readers in Arabic-speaking countries and Western liberal democracies and even (or especially) in nondemocratic countries elsewhere.

To be sure, you are entitled to have had second thoughts. You might have worried from the start about what would happen if the existing governments fell and what that would mean for peace and security within the Arab countries or in the region. But that consequentialist concern is separate and distinct from the initial intuition, which is derived from a core commitment to the democratic ideal of just, consent-based self-government.

Notice that to share this intuition, you need not have gone through the process of trying to determine exactly who was claiming to speak on behalf of the people. Identity and representativeness mattered less—much less—than that the governments actually deserved to go. Indeed, one might even think that what qualifies a group to speak on behalf of the people is that the group is making a normatively correct argument about the people's right to self-govern under conditions of freedom.

This is still a separate question from whether a group claiming to be the people should have the capacity to choose what government would replace an unjust one, or whether such a group would have the right to replace a genuinely democratic government that was in fact chosen by the people. My rather minimal argument here is only that, where we can all agree that a government is not based on consent and does not respect rights, any group that presents itself as speaking on behalf of the people may legitimately claim to do so when the content of its speech is to point out the illegitimacy of the government and call for its replacement.

Overthrow

Is that, in fact, what the protesters were calling for? We turn now to the content of the "will" expressed by "the people." Here, we encounter a paradox.

In the chant we have been assessing, the protesters called for the "overthrow" or the "fall" of the regime. But they did not specify who would overthrow it or bring it down. The basic formulation was ambiguous with respect to agency: the people wanted something to occur but did not say that *they* intended to make it happen.

The paradox is that a people acting on the basis of its own will must logically reserve to *itself* the authority to change the regime. That is, the people are the only legitimate source of revolutionary action. Yet the people held back, at least in the chant, from taking an active role in doing so. They expressed their will, but not necessarily their will to act. The ambiguous formulation hinted that the people might be willing themselves *to be acted upon* passively by someone else who would overthrow the regime.

Lest you think that I am placing too much interpretive emphasis on this possible passive reading, let me support this claim by suggesting that the passive formulation had some tactical value. The Arab spring uprising for the most part consisted of peaceful protests rather than attempts to take over the reins of political power by force.* The protests' goal from the start was to produce public pressure on autocratic rulers that would

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* I do not mean to overstate the case. On January 28, 2011, the so-called "Friday of anger," Egyptian protesters burned and looted the headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party as well as police stations around the country. The interior ministry and national television station, more traditional objects of coup d'état takeovers, were also attacked. But in the main, the Arab spring protests were framed in

result in voluntary withdrawal from office. Tunisia was, in this and other things, the model. Faced with the magnitude and continuation of the protests, Ben Ali withdrew, apparently voluntarily.

I do not mean to criticize the protesters for seeking voluntary, peaceful transitions rather than actively trying to seize power in the name of the people. To the contrary, the peaceful nature of the Arab spring protests (peaceful, that is, on the side of the protesters) deserves to be admired and complimented. The protesters surely understood that direct confrontation in the form of attacks on government facilities would backfire, invoking and perhaps justifying violent repression from the governments being challenged. In this sense, calling for the overthrow of the regime without directly attempting to bring it down can be seen as moderation, wisdom, and restraint.

Yet the same restraint also hinted at an invitation to other actors—not the people—to step into the breach. If the people were *calling* for the overthrow of the regime, but not proposing to do it themselves, then by implication they were calling *for someone else* to bring down the regime. That someone else could have been any politically elite actor with the capacity to make change. But in Egypt, as in Syria and elsewhere, there was only one institutional actor powerful enough to be a credible candidate to overthrow the regime: the army.

I want to emphasize the fateful nature of this implicit invitation to the army. The entire course of the Arab spring in Egypt was shaped (I might almost say, determined) by this idea and the reality it reflected and helped generate. The protesters could be understood as expressing their collective will not that they

the mode of "color revolutions," not coups in the manner previously more common in the history of the Arabic-speaking countries.

overthrow the regime but that the military respond to their call by doing so.

Notice that the "people" asking the military to bring down the regime reflects more than a practical recognition that only the military would have the forceful capacity to do so. It also normatively recognizes the military as an actor obligated morally or politically to act on behalf of the people. The implicit political theory of the chant, as I am reading it, is that there is a direct relationship of delegation from the people to the army. The people wills; the army acts. This implicit theory was made more explicit by another hopeful slogan that was also heard in the early days of the protests in Cairo: "The army and the people are one hand."[14]

Taking this observation a step further, it is possible to uncover an unstated assumption about political authority in the words of the protesters, at least in Egypt and perhaps elsewhere. Under this vaguely recognizable theory, the military functions as the executive arm of the will of the people. In this sense, the army is supposed to act as the guarantor of legitimate government.

This is not the place to explore fully whether such a theory of civilian-military relations could be defended in principle. If this indeed was the implicit theory of many of the protesters in Egypt, it would not have been entirely unique. From Turkey to Latin America it is possible to find variants on such a picture.

For my purposes, it should be enough to note the extreme implausibility of such a theory as a portrayal of civilian-military relations *in Egypt*. For well over half a century, Egypt had been ruled by a series of dictators, each of whom came out of the military. In other words, in Egypt, the military could not plausibly be described as an institutional delegate of the people capable of acting according to its will in displacing unjust

government—because the military was itself the power source and origin of the government in question.

To be sure, the same paradoxical call for "the overthrow of the regime" was made in Syria, with different results. Perhaps the protesters, most of them Sunni Arabs, initially hoped the military would remove Bashar al-Assad from power, even though most senior officers were 'Alawi like Bashar himself. But it soon became clear that Bashar would not be brought down from within. In the complicated period that followed—which I will explore further in chapter 3—a growing number of Syrian Sunnis began to take up arms against the regime.

The Syrian rebellion, which eventually turned into part of the Syrian civil war, was therefore not passive in the sense I have been describing. That is, its participants were not in the first instance calling on institutional actors *within* the state to bring down the regime. Although they undoubtedly sought outside help from Western powers in their fight, and indeed may have been gambling on such assistance (in the shadow of the Libyan experience)* when they took up arms, the Syrian rebels were trying to become the active agents of overthrow, not the enablers of an overthrow process that they would endorse.

Yet it also must be noticed that from the moment they took up arms, the Syrian rebels were engaged in a different social and political practice from that undertaken by the peaceful protesters who initiated the Arab spring in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. They were undertaking the distinct and vastly more dangerous step of violent rebellion against a regime they deemed illegitimate. Although voices in the Syrian National Council initially called for peaceful resistance, from the time the war began

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* Libyans resorted to force earlier than Syrians, but they did so, it seems fair to say, only after Qaddafi's forces used force against them.

in earnest, those involved were implicitly choosing not to iden-
tify with the tradition of mass nonviolent antigovernment pro-
test that goes back to Gandhi's anti-imperial movement and can
be traced through the so-called color revolutions of the early
2000s. In a way, the Syrian rebels were no longer in the realm of
"the people want the overthrow of the regime." They had gradu-
ally, but knowingly, entered the realm of war.

The Regime

What "regime" did the protesters want overthrown? In Arabic
as in English, the word "regime" has two simultaneous meanings
in politics: one specific, the other general. "Regime" can refer to
the particular configuration of people exercising power in a given
place: thus, the Ben Ali regime, the Mubarak regime, the Assad
regime. The word "regime" can also refer, more technically, to a
type of government: the regime of autocracy, the regime of de-
mocracy, the regime of monarchy. The second meaning describes
a form of rule—in principle, a form of rule that can be observed
in different places and times.

Hence, when protesters called for "the overthrow of the re-
gime," they were certainly calling for the removal of the parti-
cular governments in their specific countries. They wanted Ben
Ali and Mubarak and Bashar al-Assad out. But they were also,
with the same words, calling for the overthrow of a form of
government—specifically, the form of presidential dictatorship
that existed in most of the countries where the Arab spring had
the greatest impact.

One major consequence of the broader call for regime change
in this more general sense was to connect the different Arab
spring movements under a single structural rubric. To use the
same chant across multiple Arab states was to propose that all
were governed by the same regime, generically speaking. Despite

their individual differences, ran the implicit argument, the governments of Tunisia and Egypt and Syria and Libya and Yemen were all the same.

There was something true about this assertion. The dictatorial presidential republics that prevailed in several Arabic-speaking countries shared many significant features. They were (and are) not only instances of what Roger Owen called "Arab presidents for life"[15] but also structurally similar dictatorships built on complex and intricate combinations of military power, presidentially controlled secret services (*mukhabbarat*), and hybridized statist/market economics.

The regime commonalities suggested that Arab spring protesters in presidential dictatorships seemed to be objecting to the very form of government under which they were ruled. Support for this hypothesis may be gleaned from the subtly different rhetoric used by Arab spring protesters in the monarchies of Morocco and Jordan. In both countries, 2011 and after saw extensive public protests. But in both countries, protesters called for constitutional reform that would have changed the balance of power between the monarch and the government—not for the "overthrow of the regime."[16] If I am correct, the main reason for this difference is that Moroccans and Jordanians realistically sought change within the existing regime framework of constitutional monarchy—not the elimination of that form of government altogether. This might be because they did not think it was practically possible to overthrow their monarchs and feared retribution, because they perceived their monarchies as more legitimate than presidential dictatorships elsewhere, or a combination of the two. In any case, the difference was intentional.*

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* It is noteworthy that in Bahrain, the mostly Shiʻi protesters did call for the overthrow of the regime in the Sunni monarchy.

The protesters were also, at least in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, hitting presidential dictatorship at its weakest point: the point of potential succession. In all four of those countries—the only four Arab states in which existing governments were replaced in the Arab spring—the presidential dictator was nearing the natural end of his career. Ben Ali was 74; Mubarak was 84; Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen was 70; Qaddafi was 68. All were in ill health.

Unlike monarchy and democracy, presidential dictatorship as a regime type has no definitive model for succession. Once in a great while a presidential dictator succeeds in passing power to a son. North Korea's regime has managed to do so twice, although the Communist structure of the DPRK makes the comparison inexact. In the Arab world, the only presidential dictator to pull off the succession trick was Hafez al-Assad. Saddam Hussein and Qaddafi would surely have tried; we will never know if they would have succeeded. Mubarak was clearly toying with the idea of trying to enable his son Gamal to succeed him, but Gamal lacked support from both the public and the army.

Seeking the overthrow of presidential dictatorships at the most vulnerable period in those regimes' life cycles helped propel the successes that the Arab spring achieved in its initial months. The prospect of transition vastly weakens individual dictators because regime participants need to ask themselves what will happen next. Instead of a clear prospect that continued loyalty to the regime will be rewarded with patronage and disloyalty with punishment, regime participants must consider that there may be no surviving entity capable of rewarding fealty and punishing dissent. The uncertainties of transition therefore lead institutional actors to try to calculate what might happen during and after regime change—and to try to pick the winning side in advance.

Under these conditions, not only the specific regimes but the regime type itself looked weak—especially once thousands of protesters went to the streets and would not leave. In essence, the protesters were daring the regime to put the protests down by force. To do so required the regimes to have the loyalty of enough state actors, whether police, intelligence services, or military, actually to achieve successful repression. That meant the state actors had to judge that it was in their continuing interests to support the regimes in actions that would be seen as opposing the interests of "the people." With transitions looming, some of the state actors began to balk. That created cracks in the regimes' facade of power that in turn left room for the possibility of regime change—or at least regime decapitation.

But if the regime type of presidential autocracy was to be overthrown, what was to replace it? Unspoken assumptions abounded, both within and outside the Arab spring countries. As is often the case when it comes to collective political action, the fact that the assumptions were unspoken allowed for coordinated action among people who might not otherwise have been able to agree if they spelled out their competing visions for what would follow. At the same time, the differences in the assumptions themselves sowed the seeds of future dissension among those who were coordinating on the short-term goal of regime overthrow.

Outside the Arabic-speaking world, it was mostly taken for granted that the Arab spring protesters wanted to replace their regimes with liberal, constitutional democracy. The main basis for this idea was the apparent political continuity of the Arab spring protests with the waves of constitutional democratization that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the two decades between the fall of the Berlin wall and the Arab spring, it became a commonplace of global political discourse that peoples

achieving freedom from various forms of autocratic or authoritarian government would voluntarily choose constitutional democracy as the only plausible and obvious alternative.

By 2011, it should also have been clear that the process of constitutional democratization was not simple or inevitable. Russia, for example, had long experienced major difficulties in democratizing, difficulties to a degree reminiscent of failed earlier waves of democratization in Europe and Latin America. Yet it is important to recall that 2011 was also well before the global crisis of constitutional democracy that came into focus around 2016. Populist right-wing governments had not yet begun to erode constitutional protections in Hungary and Poland. Turkey was still wrongly understood by many observers (myself included) as trending toward a greater degree of democracy. China's economic miracle had not yet begun to exert residual pressure on the appeal of constitutional democracy as a governmental model.

Within Arab spring countries, the nature of the unspoken assumptions about future directions was trickier to identify. On the one hand, it seems to have been generally assumed that the overthrow of regimes would be followed by elections. Those elections in turn were expected to choose representatives who would draft constitutions. The constitutional government in contemplation seems to have been democratic.

On the other hand, it is remarkable—and in retrospect highly noteworthy—that nowhere in the Arab spring protests did the term "democracy" figure as a major demand or desideratum. "Freedom, dignity, and social justice" was a common (rhymed) chant. Another, more economically oriented version called for "bread, freedom and social justice." Democracy could have been accommodated in either chant with only slight metrical adjustment and perfectly adequate rhyme. It was not.[17]

Why not? One conceivable answer is that the failure of U.S. efforts to replace Saddam Hussein's regime with constitutional democracy in Iraq had discredited the call for "democracy" as an effective rhetorical gambit among Arabic-speaking people. To demand democracy might have seemed naïve or, worse, might have seemed to play into a neoconservative account of how the Middle East needs to be democratized. On this view, democracy as a political slogan had been tarnished in the region by American imperialism and its distinctively incompetent efforts to effectuate its idealistic aspirations.

Of course, constitutional democracy might have continued to function as the default model of desirable government in the Arab spring countries even if it was not politically attractive to invoke that regime form as an aspiration. In this way, the embrace of constitutional democracy would not have been based on any inherent enthusiasm for it but simply on the Churchillian notion that it was the worst form of government except for all the others.

It is possible to reconcile the absence of a call for democracy with the default assumption of elections and constitution drafting in precisely this way. Indeed, one might even go a step further and say that the constitutional process in Iraq, covered in detail by Arabic-language satellite television, provided the default assumptions for what was supposed to happen in the aftermath of regime change. Thus, notwithstanding the failure of that process to create a fully satisfactory, legitimate government in Iraq, the Iraqi constitutional process came to shape background expectations.

Another possibility, of course, is that protesters avoided mentioning democracy not because it was especially tainted but because it was simply not what was motivating the protesters. In other words, the badness of the regime of presidential dictatorship wasn't that the dictators were not elected. It was that the

regimes systematically failed to provide freedom, dignity, or social justice.

This point of view is sometimes reflected by the observation, or rather claim, that the moving force for the Arab spring protests was the breakdown of a "social contract" said to have legitimated the regimes that were being challenged.[18] According to this interpretation, the presidential dictatorships long maintained de facto legitimacy by delivering jobs, social welfare, and perhaps national uplift. As they increasingly failed to deliver these public goods, tangible and intangible, they came to be challenged for their illegitimacy.

I would like to push back against this interpretation. It is true that "democracy" in the abstract was not a key stated demand of the protesters. But I want to suggest that the "social contract" imagined to have at one time legitimated the Arab dictatorships is a chimera. The regime form of the Arab presidential dictatorships certainly did offer rhetorical justifications for its autocratic nature. But it would be a serious mistake to confuse the regimes' self-accountings for an implicit bargain between the public and the government.

It might be argued that, in some sense, every regime not actively occupied in suppressing civil revolt operates on the basis of a kind of social contract between the rulers and the ruled. On this view, if the people are not actively rebelling, then they are accepting the de facto legitimacy of the government. In turn, they must be receiving some benefits—even if only the benefit of avoiding anarchy.

Yet the term "social contract" implies, and ought to imply, a form of political agreement substantially thicker than the mere acceptance of oppressive rule as better than the alternative of risky revolt. To say that Arab presidential dictatorships rested on a social contract strongly implies that many citizens believed that

their governments were normatively legitimate, not merely that the dictator was managing to rule effectively. Normative legitimacy would mean that the public or some significant part of it accepted the ruler's authority or right to govern.

There is not sufficient evidence to support this implicit view of the pre–Arab spring presidential dictatorships. Certainly, there were constituencies in the relevant states that actively supported the regime—mostly because they benefited from that support. This would include the military as well as intelligence services and some sectors of the elite business community in Egypt, Tunisia, and Syria. But beyond the support of actors who judged that they were faring better under the dictatorship than they would have in its absence, there is no active reason to believe that the great majority of the public accepted the normative legitimacy of the dictatorships.[19]

The reason for this lack of evidence is that the dictatorships actively investigated, sought out, and punished political dissent. This authoritarian, autocratic mechanism, effectuated by the secret services, varied in degree from country to country. But in all the pre–Arab spring dictatorships, organized, sustained opposition to the state typically resulted in exile at best and incarceration and torture at worst. Opposition no doubt existed; but none of the countries had a legally recognized opposition movement with the capacity to express its views freely, much less appeal to the electorate.

Under these repressive conditions, it is difficult or impossible to imagine what evidence could convincingly prove the existence of a social contract in which the public actively embraced the regimes' normative legitimacy. Indeed, the state offered various public goods, including subsidies of basic foodstuffs, large sectors of state employment, low-cost education, and so forth. But to claim that these public goods bought normative

legitimacy is just an assertion, not a claim based on observed or observable facts.

Rather, it is entirely possible, and indeed in my view highly probable, that most citizens of the presidential dictatorships took the public goods that were offered simply because they were offered, while withholding any active support for the dictatorships' normative legitimacy. Notice that I am not saying ordinary Tunisians, Egyptians, or Syrians were without national pride. Pride in the nation does not imply acceptance of the legitimacy of the regime controlling that nation's state. It is and was perfectly plausible for Egyptians to be proud of their culture and values without seeing the regime as the legitimate manifestation of Egyptian nationhood.

I am not speaking now of the 1950s and 1960s, when (I am prepared to believe) postcolonial Arab regimes may have possessed normative legitimacy intertwined with their emergence into independence and broadly socialist-nationalist ideology. I am arguing that the events of 2011 did not result from some sudden realization of a breached social contract that had been honored or enforced for the previous half century or so. Instead, that social contract had not existed for decades.

The interpretation I am offering posits that public dissatisfaction before the Arab spring was not great enough to motivate large numbers of people to take to the streets at great personal risk and demand the overthrow of the regime. Economic grievances including rising commodity prices, unemployment, and underemployment certainly played major roles in shifting public incentives. So did the aging of the dictators themselves. But the belief that the existing regimes were failing to deliver some combination of bread, freedom, dignity, and social justice did not suddenly emerge around the time of the Arab spring. It surely represented a long-developing feeling, one that did not so much

erode the regimes' normative legitimacy as mark their ongoing illegitimacy.

The point of rejecting the putative breakdown of the hypothesized social contract is to help find an answer to the question of which type of regime the Arab spring protesters wanted to replace the one being overthrown. The answer, I think, is that the protesters did not have a clear idea of what that was. They were seeking a change in the structure of government that would provide economic and social justice—*without much specificity about what a new government would look like or how it would achieve those goals.*

Seen from this perspective, the reason the protesters did not call for democracy is not that they did not like it but simply that they were not focused on it. The protest was based on the absence of normatively legitimate government; the failure of the existing regime to produce jobs or dignity or social justice; and the sense that enough was enough. The protesters were not opposed to the idea that democracy might provide solutions to these failures and absences. But they did not express, and in many instances very probably did not hold, the a priori view that the lack of democracy was the essence of their regimes' problem or that democracy was the definitive solution.

As I shall argue later, the protesters' uncertainty about the relationship between democracy and the social changes that they sought has led to fascinating and strange consequences in Tunisia. There, the greatest consequence of the Arab spring is that constitutional democracy is taking hold. Yet the problems of economic opportunity and social justice remain as unsolved as under Ben Ali. And if constitutional rights confer dignity on some persons, they are not on their own usually sufficient to effect a transformation in the society's self-conception.

For now, it is enough to say that the wish for the overthrow of the regime was a wish for its replacement by some better regime—some type or form of government that would better serve the values of dignity and social justice and the closely related material aspiration for jobs. In Egypt, that aspiration went awry as elections led to a new government and regime that in turn gave way to a new presidential dictatorship eerily similar to the old one. In Syria, the result was even worse than this structure of recurrence. The aspiration to overthrow the regime led to a civil war fought by the regime to avoid its overthrow. That led to years of anarchy, mass destruction, mass migration, and mass deaths—all of which ended in the survival of the regime.

Conclusion: The People and the Call to Collective Action

By exploring the political meanings of the call by "the people" to overthrow their regimes, I have, I hope, also elucidated the beginnings of a theory of autonomous collective action in the Arab spring (my first major argument) and its relation to Arab nationalism (the focus of my second major argument). Whether the peoples were national or transnational, the pan-Arab character and transnational Arabic linguistic forms of the demand for action called into being a movement that sought *self*-determination. The next steps may have been uncertain, and the precise identity of who would do the work of overthrow was underspecified. But the political character of the demand was not uncertain at all. It was a demand for change made by the people, on behalf of the people, and insisting therefore on the people's right to make that change. The demands did not implicate imperial powers but Arabs—Arab peoples and Arab leaders.

Before the Arab spring began to go awry, then, its protesters deployed an implicit image of the Arab (pan-)nation, connected across geography, language, and culture. The constituent peoples of the broader nation were rising, not precisely together but also not precisely separately. They wanted or willed some transformation in the nature of the regime forms that many shared in common. In the next chapter, we shall explore the difficult meaning of what happened when the most populous Arab nation-state actually did change its regime form—then reconsidered the decision in a second, revanchist round of collective political action.

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