

Taking to the Streets: The Transformation of Arab Activism

Lina Khatib and Ellen Lust, eds.

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This edited volume consists of ten case studies framed by an introduction written by the two editors and a postscript written by Larry Diamond, a leading scholar of democracy studies today. The Introduction, which places the volume within the tradition of political sociology and political science, relates explicitly to the study of contentious politics and social movements. In doing so, it contributes to a trend in Middle Eastern studies that started during the early 2000s in analyses of Islamism and that seeks to add insights to a field that has so far been relatively neglectful of the Middle Eastern context.

The book promises to “illuminate the concept of activism as an ongoing process, rather than a sudden burst of defiance” (back cover) by critically examining the ideas that the Arab Spring emerged “from nowhere” and was driven by “tech-savvy, disgruntled youth” (p. 2). It sets out to explore the nature of activism before, during, and after the uprisings, as well as how the up-

risings shaped the activists' goals and strategies. Summing up evidence from the ten case studies, the editors note that the uprisings were the results of long-term evolutionary processes in civil society; that various social groups in both the center and on the periphery contributed to them from the very beginning; and that the protests relied on previously developed repertoires of contention. They also make the important points that activism in the Middle East often takes place outside formal institutions and that autocratic regimes cannot hinder the continuous evolution of political activism.

Each of the ten case studies – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia – support and illuminate, to varying degrees, the claims made in the Introduction. Laryssa Chomiak's study of the Tunisian uprising relates quite closely to the contentious politics framework. Going back to a mining strike in 2008, she traces the development of various grievances in different regions and how activists started to use them to criticize the regime. She also outlines the development of protest activism into an emerging, institutionalized civil society. Rabab el-Mahdi's chapter on Egypt provides a prudent analysis of the uprising, one that highlights the lack of organization among the youth activists who were the backbone of the protest movement that toppled Mubarak. A refreshing feature here is that she identifies the mass protests against Israel's repression of the second Palestinian intifada as an important precursor to the mass protests of 2011, since most analysts start with the emergence of the Kifaya movement during the mid-2000s.

The detailed account of the Libyan uprising given by Intissar K. Rajabany and Lihi Ben Shitrit is the one that perhaps most clearly brings out the importance of new communication technologies. They argue that the country's geography served to isolate activists in different regions and that the introduction of Internet-based media greatly facilitated cross-regional and international coordination to topple Qadhafi's regime. Gamal Gasim goes all the way back to the 1990s to explain Yemen's uprising, in which the southern Yemeni HIRAK movement played an important role. Like the Egyptian uprising, the Yemeni one was characterized by a large youth movement that was eventually marginalized by the established elites; Gasim explains how this happened. Wael Sawah and Salam Kawakibi argue that one of the most noteworthy aspects of the Syrian uprising was the change from nonpolitical to political activism and from small groups to coordinated, large-scale efforts.

In a highly informative chapter on Bahrain, Laurence Louër breaks down the political actors in that country's upheaval and explains the dynamics among them. Equally informative is Ahmed Benchemsi's detailed and fast-

paced account of the unrest and subsequent political reforms in Morocco. Mohammed Yaghi and Janine A. Clark's analysis of Jordanian activism revolves, to a large degree, around the conflicting goals of the old (Palestinian-affiliated) and new (Trans-Jordanian) opposition. Kuwait, which has not received much attention in the Arab Spring literature, is well served by Mary Ann Tétreault. She provides the volume's clearest illustration of how the 2011 protest movements were not a new phenomenon by investigating key moments in Kuwait's dramatic, but largely peaceful, political dynamics. The last case study, on Saudi Arabia, is a rather depressing one, as Stéphane Lacroix shows how the Saudi regime has mastered a divide-and-rule strategy that has left the small opposition there highly fragmented – both in terms of Sunni-Shi'ah differences and internal struggles among Sunni activists.

Larry Diamond's postscript, which takes up where the case studies leave off, draws on political theory to discuss what developments are needed for grassroots activism to lead to lasting democratic change. He highlights the need for better organization of popular movements and for clear, mutually agreed-upon rules of the game in the transition process, based on confidence-building measures and an independent judiciary – all of which have been absent in most of the processes covered by this volume.

There is already a large body of literature dealing with the Arab uprisings, and many of these works are edited volumes. Overall, this book is clearly on the more interesting end of the scale. To differing degrees it engages actively with the literature on contentious politics while providing detailed and empirically rich case studies. The editors have managed to mold a coherent and sound framework for the case studies, and the idea of inviting a leading political scientist to write a postscript works very well, since Diamond provides a theoretical lens through which to assess the developments so far and the challenges that lie ahead. One might have wished for a more daring or ambitious set of aims; the claim that the Arab uprisings were not spontaneous outbursts of discontent is neither novel nor difficult to argue. Some of the chapters would have benefitted from more focus on explanation and less on description. At the same time, however, the editors engage with the study of contentious politics and social movements, and so this book is a good companion, as it were, to Joel Beinin and Frédéric Vairel's *Social Movements, Mobilization, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (Stanford University Press: 2011).

Several of the case studies are comparable to the Introduction when it comes to analytical depth; the chapters on Tunisia, Bahrain, Morocco, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia are particularly illuminating to this reviewer. In general, all

of the case studies provide solid empirical findings that may be drawn on by both scholars and students for further analysis. The contributors also avoid simplifications based on the notion of ethnic and sectarian tensions, and the case studies are useful correctives to media representations of Middle Eastern politics in this regard. The volume is a welcome contribution to the literature on contentious politics and mobilization and should be equally valuable for university courses and scholars working on political sociology.

Each chapter comes with a timeline of events and a short text by a prominent activist from the country in question that gives a first-hand account of selected aspects of the uprisings and unrest. Both features are good ideas, but more could have been made of them. The timeline has been inserted almost randomly, and the idea behind including texts by activists seems to have been little more than giving them a voice – it is hardly a “pairing” of first-hand perspectives and critical analysis, as the editors claim (back cover). However, these minor weaknesses do not detract significantly from the value of the book, which is a welcome addition to the literature on the Arab uprisings.

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