



Variety of groups and protests in repressive contexts: The 2011 Egyptian uprisings and their aftermath

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journals.sagepub.com/home/iss**Giuseppe Acconcia** 

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Abstract

This article examines the role of various social groups in shaping protests in repressive contexts. The empirical study focuses on the Egyptian uprisings that started in January 2011. The authors use data collected through semi-structured interviews undertaken between 2011 and 2015 with 58 individuals who had all participated in such protests and who were members of various types of organizations. The results show that, in contrast to the arguments highlighting the spontaneous, internet-based nature of the protests that occurred in 2011 in the MENA region, individuals' membership in organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood, and in more informal groups such as Popular Committees or independent trade unions have been crucial for their engagement in protests. The findings also highlight the flexible and dynamic form of organizations active in repressive contexts, which are capable of reacting and adapting easily to a changing context.

Keywords

2011 uprising, informal groups, organizations, protests, repressive contexts

Introduction

Since the 1970s, the mainstream literature on social movements has argued that social movement organizations (SMOs) are among the most crucial groups capable of mobilizing resources for collective actions (Diani, 2015; McCarthy and Zald, 1977). This basic

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tenet has been largely revised with the diffusion of ICTs (Bennett and Segerberg, 2013) as made clear by the claim that it is possible to 'organize without organizations'. This has appeared even more true for those collective actions taking place in repressive contexts. The Arab Uprisings, the protests which started in December 2010 in Tunisia and soon spread through many Middle East and North African countries were greeted as the 'Facebook revolutions'. Such protests have been examined as spontaneous events supported by ICTs (Hamanaka, 2020; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Lim, 2012; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017), rather than as a result of mobilization by SMOs as the traditional literature on social movements would have sustained. In fact, the oppositional space in which SMOs can operate is narrow under repressive conditions and informal networks and loosely structured social groups, often supported by the use of ICTs, are more likely to mobilize resources for political engagement (Bayat, 2010; Clark, 2004b; Duboc, 2011; Trejo, 2012).

Despite the emphasis, especially by the media, on the spontaneity and sudden eruption of the protests in January 2011, the uprisings in Egypt have also been examined as a long-term revolutionary process that started long before the 2011 upheaval (Abdelrahman, 2015; Achcar, 2013). Protests in Egypt spread throughout the early 2000s in various campaigns including the pro-Palestine university mobilizations in 2000, protests against the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, the movements around *Kifaya* in 2004, the march of the judges for independence of the judiciary system in 2006, and workers' protests beginning in 2008. In line with this, and despite the general emphasis on the spontaneity of protests, we aim to focus on the variety of groups and organizations which became mobilizing structures during and in the aftermath of the Egyptian Arab Uprisings.¹ While political organizations under authoritarian regimes may not operate as they do in democratic contexts, both apolitical organizations and informal groups can provide resources for political engagement. This often occurs through a mixture of organized and spontaneous mobilizations (Snow and Moss, 2014).

In this article, we aim to unfold the role of the following types of groups which acted as major structures of mobilization during the 2011 protests in Egypt: the Muslim Brotherhood and their links with the Popular Committees, and self-organized workers' groups and their ties with institutionalized independent trade unions. By focusing on these groups, we examine the role of established organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and trade unions as well as that of less structured and informal groups like Popular Committees or self-organized workers' groups, contending that they were strictly interconnected during and after the 2011 protests. In both cases, one provided the structural basis for the other, and established organizations switched to more informal groups and vice versa.

Our empirical analysis uses data derived from extensive fieldwork notes collected in Egypt between 2011 and 2015. In particular, it draws on 58 semi-structured interviews undertaken between January 2011 and June 2015 in Cairo and Mahalla al-Kubra.

Results highlight the variety of forms of groups which engaged in the pre-revolutionary coalitions with the aim of ousting Mubarak as well as in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings, which was characterized by a political transition that culminated in the backlash of an authoritarian regime through the 2013 military coup. As our results will show, organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood provided support for political engagement

through other organizational forms, namely loosely organized groups such as Popular Committees. In addition, informal groups such as self-organized workers' groups provided the basis for more established mobilizing structures such as the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU) to take place once protests in 2011 started.

Variety of mobilizing groups in repressive contexts

Several scholars have approached the analysis of the Arab Uprisings drawing on the literature of social movements, which associates the rise of protests to several concepts – including political opportunity structures, mobilizing structures such as organizations and framing processes (McAdam et al., 1996). By examining protests through the concept of political opportunity structures, Goldstone has argued that ‘the single best key to where regimes in MENA have been overturned or faced massive rebellions is where personalist regimes have arisen’ (Goldstone, 2016: 108). Other scholars have put emphasis on the role of mobilizing structures, both offline and online. Among the latter, the role of ICTs such as Facebook or Twitter have been the focus of analyses by various authors (Hamanaka, 2020; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Lim, 2012; Steinert-Threlkeld, 2017). Among mobilizing structures, trade unions or popular committees have been largely investigated as crucial spaces for the process of resource mobilization (Abdelrahman, 2015; Achcar, 2013; el-Meehy, 2012). In line with these authors, we aim to investigate the variety of social groups which have fostered the rise of protests in Egypt. In fact, one of the main functions of organizations is the capacity to articulate political demands, and organizations enhance the coordination of collective actions and protests undertaken with the aim of promoting social and political change (Tilly, 1978). As has long been argued (McCarthy and Zald, 1977), organizations lower the costs associated with collective actions as they support the coordination of activities thanks to the presence of leadership, and facilitate sustained and durable social interactions which aid the development of collective identities.² They also smooth the flow of information and its exchange, mobilize and aggregate resources such as money, provide spaces, equipment and infrastructure for the implementation of activities, giving the social and political legitimacy that single actors may not have. Studies have demonstrated that organizational involvement allows people to increase their social capital, to improve their communicative skills, their organizational abilities and their capacity to manage groups' coordination, therefore facilitating the involvement in collective actions and in political activities (Verba et al., 1995). The aforementioned resources have been highlighted for most SMOs operating under democratic conditions. However, the oppositional space in which political organizations such as SMOs in repressive contexts can operate is narrow, and hinders the possibility for organizations to engage in contentious collective actions. Under repressive conditions, SMOs can adapt or redefine their actions in two different ways. On the one hand, organizations may adhere to associational agendas promoted by authorities that directly serve their political mandates, consequently reinforcing clientelistic behaviors, corruption, and nepotism and promoting ideals that are not critical of the regimes (Jamal, 2007). On the other hand, political organizations may replace their usual activities of lobbying, political networking, or linking with media, to avoid targeted and systematic repressive measures, by innovating the repertoire of action through: (1) the

radicalization of organizational activities, that is, the use of more confrontational activities, including engagement in violent political actions; (2) the transnationalization of organizational activities, that is, their diffusion across national boundaries and states (Tarrow, 1996: 52), as is the case of internationally supported nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) focusing on human rights and international law discourses; and (3) the moderation of the organizations' repertoires of action (Pilati, 2016). Unlike political organizations, those concentrating on apolitical claims and agendas can operate more freely under authoritative conditions, given that they are likely to be perceived as non-threatening by the ruling elites (Hinnebusch, 2015). Organizations working in service delivery and provision, like charity organizations sustaining the population with employment opportunities, housing, or health assistance, do not represent explicit challenges for authorities. Sometimes, religious organizations can also freely operate under authoritarian regimes (Trejo, 2012). Mechanisms accounting for the potential of apolitical organizations to be mobilizing structures include, first, their capacity to facilitate social and recreational activities where people discuss and get to know new people and reinforce their sociability networks. Apolitical organizations are places where broader processes of political socialization also take place (cf. Bayat, 2010; Clark, 2004a; Dorsey, 2012). Second, like most voluntary organizations in Western contexts (Verba et al., 1995), apolitical organizations can provide important resources for contentious collective actions such as leadership, skills related to the management of collective events, group coordination, and dissemination of information otherwise unavailable to individuals. Third, in addition to resource-based mechanisms, these organizations can provide a rationale for opinions and actions as well as for defining members' collective identities (Lichterman, 2008). Hence, they can provide a 'cultural toolkit' of collectively held meanings and symbols used as a collective action frame (McVeigh and Sikkink, 2001: 1429). When experiencing repressive measures, apolitical organizations can therefore become places for sustaining the creation and intensification of a political consciousness and narrative of cultures of resistance.

Scholars have argued that in circumstances where there is limited space for organizations to work, informal groups are crucial sites for the mobilization of resources in repressive contexts (Bayat, 2010; Pfaff, 1996). By 'informal groups' we mean groups with no stable structure, where members' roles, positions, and behaviors are not defined by fixed rules as in organizations, and whose actions often concern daily practices and individual experience (cf. Melucci, 1996). Thanks to dense and close-knit interactions informal groups can mobilize primary solidarities, and convince personal involvement and commitment in the context of rapidly shifting political opportunities. Solidarities may nurture the construction of alternative identities, based on the politicization of shared grievances pertaining to private life (Gould, 1991; Pfaff, 1996: 98). In small and midsize informal groups, where individuals have high levels of trust, loyalties to each other, and strong shared feelings of belonging, expectations of solidarity and participation are possible even under conditions of extreme risk (Gould, 1991). Friends and acquaintances may also enable the exchange of political information, political discussion, and political resources. The amount of political discussion occurring in an individual's social network correlates with his or her level of political participation (Klofstad, 2011).

As mentioned above, ties built on the web may further facilitate collective actions under repressive conditions (Bremer, 2012; el-Meehy, 2012; Hamaana, 2020; Howard and Hussain, 2013; Lim, 2012).³ Below we discuss the variety of organizations and informal groups, as well as their interconnections, which were actively present during and in the aftermath of the protests that erupted in Egypt in January 2011.

Organizations under Mubarak's regime

Many studies have shown the presence of an important pre-existing organizational structure operating throughout the repressive regime under the mandate of Mubarak – who served as the President of Egypt from 1981 to 2011 (Abdelrahman, 2015; Achcar, 2013; della Porta, 2014). These organizations likely prepared the ground for the protests that erupted in 2011. On the one hand, organizations such as the major governmental trade union in Egypt, the Egyptian Federation of Trade Union (ETUF), had been largely coopted by Mubarak under his mandate. This organization practically played no role in the development and coordination of the January 2011 protests. ETUF was also absent from the coordination of previous protests such as those that erupted in 2008 in Mahalla al-Kubra. On the other hand, some other organizations had been crucial for the emergence of many protests that were observed throughout the first decade of the millennium as well as for those that erupted in 2011. *Kifaya* (Enough!), a network striving for reforms and change including organizations such as Journalists for Change, Doctors for Change, Youth for Change, Workers for Change, and Artists for Change, developed from informal networks among dissenters, and the April 6th Youth Movement (A6YM) had been active both prior to and during the Arab Spring (Beinin, 2011). Public gatherings organized from December 2004 to September 2005 in Egypt by *Kifaya* were in fact possible thanks to *Kifaya* activists' strategy to self-limit their mobilization. *Kifaya* was politically active thanks to the use of moderated repertoires of action – a result of the limits imposed on the number of people participating in the organized demonstrations and on the choice of location of mobilization. *Kifaya* paid careful attention to the extent of mobilization, never exceeding a thousand people, and its location, mobilizing in downtown Cairo rather than in densely populated areas where too many people could gather. This enabled the network to repeatedly denounce domestic issues related, for instance, to President Hosni Mubarak's repressive regime and his attempts to enact hereditary succession (Beinin, 2011: 185; Duboc, 2011: 61; Vairel, 2011: 32).

In addition to the *Kifaya* network, other organizations prepared the terrain for the protests observed in 2011. Some Muslim Brotherhood members from Alexandria and supporters of the Revolutionary Socialists, after years of debate over the correct form of organizational structure to follow, formed the National Alliance for Change and Unions within universities in 2005 (Manduchi, 2014). Together with *Kifaya* activists, the Revolutionary Socialists were among those who took part in the anti-police riots that broke out after the murder of the young activist Khaled Said in Alexandria in 2010 by a police officer. Moreover, women played a key role in mobilizing dissent, as happened thanks to the development of a significant grassroots women's movement prior to 2011, for example within NGOs like the Alliance for Arab Women (Amar and Lababidy, 1999). Thus, women have been protagonists of the 2011 street protests, and have been relevant

both within workers' movements and Popular Committees (Biagini, 2020), despite the fact that they have been frequently attacked by ruling governments (Pilati et al., 2019).

Studies have also shown the role of social Islamist organizations. As Wickham (2002) explains, Islamist groups had more success overcoming authoritarian constraints than their secular rivals did. In Egypt, new opportunities for Islamic organizations and outreach began to emerge on the periphery. In other words, social, cultural and economic groups and networks enabled citizens to participate in public life but did not compete for political power (Wickham, 2002: 13). By promoting new values, identities, and commitments, the Islamists had created new motivations for action. For instance, the graduates' embrace of an ideology was based on framing activism as a 'moral obligation' (Wickham, 2002: 148–151). Islamist outreach to educated youth took place in local mosques, community associations, informal study groups, summer camps, and peer networks, the building blocks of a vast, decentralized Islamic sector with substantial autonomy from state control (Wickham, 2002: 16).

Below we investigate whether and how some of the aforementioned groups, despite different organizational forms, were crucial for the development of such events.

The empirical study

Data sources

The fieldwork research comprised 58 semi-structured interviews undertaken by the first author (Acconcia, 2018).⁴ Twenty semi-structured interviews were conducted with male and female, Islamist and secular Egyptian activists: Revolutionary Socialists, *Kifaya*, Socialist Alliance (16%) and Young Islamists (18%); nine with male (7%) and female (8.5%) trade unionists; 29 with male (27%) and female (23.5%) workers and ordinary citizens involved in grassroots mobilizations (e.g. Popular Committees) in Cairo and Mahalla al-Kubra between 2011 and 2015.

The empirical research involved Egyptian activists with low and high education backgrounds, middle and upper-middle class citizens (44.5%), working class (15.5%) and lower-middle class Egyptians (40%).

Some of the interviews were conducted through a number of collective discussions. The testimonies offered insights and perspectives of the post-2011 uprisings in urban and peripheral Egyptian neighborhoods.

As for the interviewees involved in Popular Committees, after a first meeting with an ECESR gatekeeper (Center for Economic and Social Rights), a snowball method was utilized in order to involve other participants. Thus, the selection of the interviewees was based on contacts from initial members active in the local committees to additional participants via chain referral in order to select both civil society activists and ordinary citizens.

In addition, the gatekeepers working as NGO activists and trade unionists were interviewed in Cairo. They formed part of the process for the composition and organization of the interviews carried out in Mahalla al Kubra. The semi-structured interviews were organized with the specific aim of understanding: the workings of grassroots mobilization and police repression, levels of mobilization within the social movements, cooperation

between the oppositional groups, personal changes in political participation of specific activists after the 2013 military coup, narratives of the 2011 uprisings and their aftermath, relations with state agencies, political parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, targets and strategies of these organizations. At the end of each meeting we had a debriefing session with the gatekeepers involved in order to talk about the group dynamics and the relevant results of their activities.

Those among the interviewees who were supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood appeared to be supportive of the changing nature of the activities of the group from a primarily apolitical service organization, prior to February 2011, to a political party.⁵ This meant a more open participation in public protests between January 2011 and June 2011 (especially on Fridays in the period between the Tahrir Square protests and the Agouza protests), on the eve of the Mohammed Mahmoud Street clashes, in November 2011, and in June 2012 and June 2013, supporting the legitimacy of the elected president, Mohammed Morsi.⁶ Those among the unionized workers and farmers interviewed in Mahalla al-Kubra had been part of several waves of protests before the 2011 uprisings, especially within *Kifaya* and April 6th Youth Movements. However, this participation in many cases had not been clearly formalized and remained at the individual level, although some of the interviewees had been affiliated to a trade union since the 1980s.⁷

Access to the field was very problematic, especially as a consequence of the increasingly repressive measures taken after the 2013 military coup in Egypt. At the beginning, the interviewees did not express any security concerns with reference to their participation in the interviews. However, after the 2014 presidential elections in Egypt, the local trade unionists involved in the interviews conducted in Mahalla al-Kubra appeared to be more concerned about voicing their opinions.⁸ Some of the workers asked to be mentioned only by their first names in order to be less identifiable. As a consequence, all interviewees have been anonymized and each interviewee was assigned a number.

Variety of groups and the 2011 protests in Egypt

The Muslim Brotherhood

The monopolization of political dissent by Islamist groups is a common feature of many Arab and Middle Eastern countries. In *Weapons of the Weak*, James Scott (2011) explained how Islamists monopolized the space of dissent in the village of Sadaka. As Bayat (2010) noted, Scott's ethnographic studies focusing on individual reactions of peasants, along with Foucault's decentered notion of power and the revival of the concept of Neo-Gramscian hegemony, can serve to enhance a 'micro-politics' perspective on social movements. Ever since its foundation, the Muslim Brotherhood indeed operated as a substitute for the state among the lower social strata, therefore challenging the legitimacy of the ruling elite (Mitchell, 1969: 169). Placing these approaches in the context of the Egyptian protests between 2010 and 2012, not only did the Islamists monopolize the opposition movements in the pre-revolutionary phase but, during the uprisings, they manipulated street movements and less organized entities in order to use and then deactivate their revolutionary potential. At the very beginning of the occupation of Tahrir Square on 25 January 2011, in a wave of high political mobilization and

solidarity between the movements, there was ‘noncompetitive cooperation’ (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 157) between the different groups. This was helped by the permanent occupation of the same public spaces. After the dismissal of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011, the Muslim Brotherhood and other opposition groups witnessed, in contrast, a ‘competitive cooperation’ (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 157). This phase lasted until the Mohammed Mahmoud Street clashes in November 2011. At this stage, despite a long internal debate about the need to forge a political party, different waves of state repression, and increased engagement in grassroots associations, the Muslim Brotherhood decided to formalize their political party Freedom and Justice (FJP) and took part in the electoral process (Ketchley, 2017). This had consequences on their members’ engagement in protests. As a female activist who took part in Tahrir Square demonstrations stated, ‘During the days of fights on Mohammed Mahmoud Street, the Muslim Brotherhood abandoned the youth of Tahrir in the streets.’⁹ The electoral victories of FJP in 2012, helped by the absence of politicians belonging to the National Democratic Party (NDP) at the parliamentary elections due to their temporary ban from party politics, saw ‘neutrality’ (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 157) prevailing among the opposition movements or newly formed political parties. This stage was backed by a wave of demobilizing political engagement and strengthened ideological sentiment of belonging. The army’s stigmatization of the Muslim Brotherhood as counter-revolutionaries stimulated renewed protests that brought about a complete fragmentation of the coalition of forces of the 2011 uprisings in the wake of the 3 July 2013 military coup (Barrie and Ketchley, 2018). ‘We [the Muslim Brotherhood] tried to include other opposition forces within the Constituent Assembly. That year they [other opposition groups] were called hundreds of times to give them responsibilities within the government. They always refused’, a male activist who took part in Tahrir Square demonstrations explained.¹⁰

Despite strengthening electoral politics and demobilizing street politics, the role of the Muslim Brotherhood was crucial for the emergence, in 2011, of new means of popular mobilization, triggered by participation of many of its members in alternative networks which included local Popular Committees.

Popular Committees

The 2011–2013 mass riots were paramount in the formation of new means of popular mobilization such as Popular Committees that aimed at enhancing a diverse range of unmet needs and motivating ordinary citizens to participate in a series of activities. These included providing social services, security and self-defense, delivering gas tanks for cooking and heating, supplying food at low prices, planning sewage systems, and bringing electricity to residents, as well as participating in the political arena (Hassan, 2015). Members of Popular Committees were often supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and of *Salafi* groups and exhibited ‘important continuities with Islamist activism’. As we have discussed, Islamic activism includes major social charities in Egypt (el-Meehy, 2012) and the latter are considered free spaces in repressive contexts. Popular Committees in Egypt were frequently rooted within the pre-existing networks of Muslim Brotherhood charities, private voluntary organizations (PVOs), schools, and hospitals. ‘The Popular

Committees have been put in place thanks to the organizational structure of the Muslim Brotherhood, their specific knowledge of the district and their capacity to identify any minimum risk. Their representatives within the charities were very useful in order to unify and manage the people taking part within the Committees', a male participant within Popular Committees in Cairo explained.¹¹

In this framework, Popular Committees played a crucial role in promoting individuals' active engagement in politics, both institutional politics and protests (el-Meehy, 2012). According to the Egyptian Life for Development Foundation (el-Meehy, 2012), thousands of Popular Committees (*lijan sha'biyya* in Arabic) were active in Cairo during the 18 days of occupation of Tahrir Square. In three days, between the first demonstration in Tahrir Square in Cairo on 25 January 2011 and the 'Friday of Anger' on 28 January 2011, the police began to retreat or apparently disappear from the Egyptian streets and in a few hours, Popular Committees were quickly organized. 'Neighborhood watch brigades, typically led by young men, sprang up to fill the security void as reports of criminal violence mounted.'¹² During our interviews we talked to male and female participants in one of Berqet Fil's Popular Committees in Sayeda Zeinab about the reasons why they initially mobilized. As an interviewee stated, ordinary people were heavily involved in self-defense groups: 'I spent all day and night taking care of the safety of my neighborhood.'¹³ Another interviewee added that their mobilization was a direct consequence of the absence of policemen. 'With the honest people of my area we formed groups to substitute [for] the absence of policemen after their disappearance.'¹⁴ According to another interviewee, 'The police force disappeared from the street because it was not trained to resist for days of confrontations at the micro level with the people. It has been a structural failure, caused by the interruption of communications (often brought about by a lack of a battery in their walkie-talkies).'¹⁵

The mobilization of the Popular Committees was a first reaction to the arbitrary methods of the police. 'During my night shift, I often encountered former and violent policemen engaged in indiscriminate lootings.'¹⁶ Another interviewee added that his participation in the Popular Committees was necessary to protect his home from the growing presence of criminals.¹⁷

According to el-Meehy (2012), in some districts the Committees continued to gather in spring and summer of 2011 to discuss the main problems of the neighborhood: 'cleaning streets, fixing water fountains to improve living conditions in the area and painting buildings'. Furthermore, in the neighborhood of Basatin in the Cairo Governorate where she focused her research, the members of Popular Committees 'gradually turned their attention to politics', evolving towards 'active citizenship' (el-Meehy, 2012). The Committee's participants were also involved in the electoral campaign for the constitutional amendments in the March 2011 referendum, although many participants had returned to their daily life and were more inclined towards mainstream opinions, which stigmatized the remaining activists, who were pictured as a source of instability and therefore against Egyptian national interests. In 2011 and 2012 many of the interviewees were also engaged in the more institutional pursuit of electoral campaigns and in party politics. The majority of the interviewees supported the Muslim Brotherhood at the ballot boxes during the November 2011–January 2012 parliamentary elections. 'I was interested in Freedom and Justice Party (FJP). Thus, I decided to vote for them at the

parliamentary elections', interviewed male and female participants within Popular Committees in Cairo stated.¹⁸ They argued that the Muslim Brotherhood supporters encouraged their constituency to participate in the electoral process promising different kind of rewards. 'The supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafi* groups, previously present within the Popular Committees, were distributing food, sugar, oil and clothes (*galabyyas*) at the school entrances to encourage their supporters to vote for them,'¹⁹ he recalled. In this framework, the participants in the Popular Committees, especially the young, students or unemployed, had been the first to be ready to take part during the continual waves of electoral mobilization and campaigns. Some of them appeared to be motivated by more conscious revolutionary and secular intentions: 'We wanted a new Constitution. For this reason, we distributed flyers asking to the people to vote No.'²⁰ Others were motivated by a nationalist, populist and genuine sense of belonging: 'We agreed with the decision of the Muslim Brotherhood to support the call of the army not to make major changes to the then existing Constitution.'²¹ Once again they were confronted with an electoral choice on the occasion of the 2012 presidential elections.²² They decided to vote for Mohammed Morsi only to prevent the election of the former Mubarak regime prime minister, Ahmed Shafiq. 'We were not happy with the Muslim Brotherhood but we did not want a *felul* [man of the old regime] to be the new president.'²³ 'Some of the members of our Committee during the days of the revolution encouraged people of my building to go to vote for the Brotherhood representative. Many of them did it for the relationships of trust built-up especially during the previous months of mobilization.'²⁴ On the other hand, young participants within Popular Committees began their boycotts of the electoral process. 'Leftist parties were not ready to prepare a campaign. I could never expect that a politician coming from the Muslim Brotherhood could have been chosen as the new Egyptian president.'²⁵

According to el-Meehy (2012), the Popular Committees were successfully engaged in more ambitious projects as well. 'Ard al-Lewa's Committee self-financed a railway crossing to minimize accidents among residents. It also mobilized around the establishment of a park, school and a hospital on fourteen feddans of vacant land owned by the Ministry of Religious Endowments (*Awqaf*) in the neighborhood. Next door, the committee in Imbaba organized effective nonpayment campaigns for public services the state failed to provide, such as garbage collection, while Nahia's Committee constructed an on/off ramp to connect the neighborhood to the ring road.'²⁶ By doing so the Popular Committees were slowly becoming NGOs, tending to merge with the pre-existing networks of Muslim Brotherhood charities, schools and hospitals. As an interviewee confirmed, 'In Berqet Fil, many participants within the Popular Committees were involved in associations working with the elders or providing social services to the disabled.'²⁷ Other interviewees from the Popular Committees began working in centers and NGOs focused on the defense of human rights. 'My participation in the grassroots movements has been vital for my present work position as a human rights defender,'²⁸ an interviewee added. However, after the 2013 military coup in Egypt, all the charities of the Muslim Brotherhood, its hospitals, its NGOs, its associations, and its media outlets were either closed down, or faced noticeable levels of repression or the removal of their former management. The Society of the Muslim Brotherhood, its political party the FJP, and the coalition defending the Morsi government's legitimacy were all outlawed by the Egyptian

courts. Finally, the Islamist movements within the universities were heavily repressed (especially on the Al-Azhar and Ayn Shamps campuses). After the Rabaa massacre (14 August 2013), interviewed male and female participants within Popular Committees ceased to take any further part in the electoral processes or in demonstrations. ‘We boycotted the Constitutional Referendum (January 2014), presidential and parliamentary elections (May 2014, December 2015)’, two participants within Popular Committees in Cairo stated.²⁹

Trade unions and workers’ mobilization

Trade unions did not act as structures of resource mobilization for the 2011 protests. First and foremost, ETUF, the official trade union, did not support the protests, in continuity with its behavior in previous years. Controlled by the Mubarak regime, ETUF did not call for labor protests during the 2011 uprisings, even if many groups were clearly ready for a mass mobilization. The spontaneous workers’ committees acting at the local level had no ‘institutional mechanism to compel the ETUF to join the popular movement against Mubarak’ (Beinin, 2016: 107). In other words, the local committees were not duplicated at the national level through an organizational structure capable of coordinating the local level actions. Many workers were initially organized in more spontaneous oppositional mobilization. As argued by Beinin (2011: 183), even workers’ protests in Egypt between 2006 and 2009 did not rely on ‘movement entrepreneurs’ or pre-existing organizations. With the exception of the support from several labor-oriented NGOs, workers’ protests in Egypt mainly relied on occasional face-to-face meetings and mobile telephones, supported by family and neighborhood connections (Beinin, 2011: 183). The working class networks were thus highly localized, whereby family and neighborhood connections were of utmost importance in the daily life and in the construction of workers’ neighborhoods. Spontaneous workers’ groups found an institutional form only after the protests broke out. Indeed, on 30 January 2011, the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services (CTUWS) coordinator, Kamal Abbas, and the Union of Real Estate Tax Authority Workers (RETAU) president, Kamal Abu Eita, along with smaller unions of teachers, health professionals and retiree associations formed the Egyptian Federation of Independent Trade Unions (EFITU). Despite ETUF’s continued support of the state institutions, in April its president, Hussein Megawer, was arrested for his affiliation to the then dissolved National Democratic Party (NDP) and the individual presence of Muslim Brotherhood figures among its members was growing, especially during their year in power (2012–2013).³⁰

The Tahrir Square demonstrations encouraged the workers’ groups to mobilize, communicate and build inter-group networks (Tripp, 2013: 160). In early 2011, the nationwide teachers’ strike involving half a million workers demanded the *cleansing (tathir)* of public institutions of the remnants of the old regime (Hanieh, 2013: 169). In February 2011, 489 strikes occurred in Egypt. EFITU issued a statement proclaiming the ‘Demands of the Workers in the Revolution’: the right to form non-governmental unions, the right to strike, and the dissolution of the pro-regime and corrupt ETUF. The SCAF (Supreme Council of the Armed Forces) appointed Ahmed el-Borai, professor of labor law at Cairo University, as the interim Minister of Manpower. Therefore, labor mobilizations were

constantly increasing in parallel with some trade unionists' attempts to have better represented workers' rights within the interim government.

In April 2013, a second federation of independent unions was established: the Egyptian Democratic Labor Council (EDLC) convened with 149 unions represented.³¹ Mobilizations continued until the military junta intervened in order to put all kind of protests under state control. Thus, while el-Borai promoted a draft law for the legalization of EFITU in August 2011, a law criminalizing strikes, demonstrations and sit-ins was also approved (Abdelrahman, 2015; Tripp, 2013: 161).

Evidence from our qualitative research confirmed workers' early participation in the 2011 protests in Mahalla al-Kubra even if the number of participants was not comparable to the Tahrir Square mass riots. Moreover, many of them had already been involved in other previous anti-regime mobilizations and strikes. As mentioned, according to our interviewees the workers' movement had been spontaneously activated,³² but workers had prior individual experience in SMOs and protests. Among the protesters there were many long-term supporters of anti-Mubarak movements, especially *Kifaya*: 'We were previously involved in the *Kifaya* movement', a male unionized worker stated,³³ while others had already taken part in the 2006–2008 labor strikes. 'We participated during the first protests after an already long-lasting struggle to overcome the rooted crisis of the Egyptian cotton industry', three male and female unionized workers in Mahalla al-Kubra added.³⁴ Other interviewees continued: 'We have been used for years to go to downtown Cairo during mass demonstrations and strikes or close to the Mubarak residency in Qasr al-Qobba to demonstrate against his neo-liberal labor policies.'³⁵ The participants, male and female unionized workers in Mahalla al-Kubra and a supporter of the Revolutionary Socialists (RS), demanded better working conditions and new investments in the textile industries. 'We were among the hundreds of young people of the revolution gathering in Shon Square in Mahalla al-Kubra asking for human working conditions', a male unionized worker stated.³⁶ 'There were many contradictions in the working class. We worked to bring the factories to Tahrir and vice versa. Our slogan was the Square and the factory hand in hand.'³⁷

As for the period of political transition, initially, for many workers it seemed wise to take part in the 2011–2012 parliamentary elections although many other workers – in Cairo, Suez, and Alexandria – were already feeling marginalized within the political arena and decided to boycott the elections from that stage onwards. 'I decided to go to vote and support independent workers or some candidates of the local party al-Adl [Justice]', a female unionized worker stated.³⁸ On the occasion of the 2012 Constitutional Referendum, the Mahalla al-Kubra workers and farmers were already very critical of the political approach of the Muslim Brotherhood. The 'No to the New Constitution' here won with 52%. In more general terms, all the policies implemented at the national level by the Islamists appeared to be ineffective in supporting workers' rights. 'The 2012 Constitution was against workers' rights'³⁹, an RS female activist added.⁴⁰

In 2015 a number of new strikes in textile, cement and building factories began. According to our interviewees, those strikes were neither structured nor well organized. 'The fear among workers, farmers and all other opposition groups is unprecedented within the framework of al-Sisi's military regime',⁴¹ highlighted an interviewee. 'The December 2015 meeting at the Center for Trade Union and Workers Services [CTUWS]

in Cairo was especially important because it was a first attempt to coordinate again the works of the local fragmented and isolated unions', a female unionized worker in Mahalla al-Kubra added.⁴² 'On this occasion we decided to forge a committee representing workers' rights and to launch a national campaign for supporting trade union freedoms', she continued.

Discussion and conclusion

The article aimed to understand the role of different types of mobilizing groups during and in the aftermath of the protests that started in 2011 in Egypt. It tried to encompass the analysis of both loose and informal groups, more structured organizations and their interconnections. Empirically, the study drew on a qualitative analysis, using data collected through semi-structured interviews undertaken between 2011 and 2015 with members of Popular Committees, unionized workers, members of the Revolutionary Socialists, and *Kifaya* movement. Our findings show that the protests in 2011 were not fully spontaneous and that a pre-existing organizational structure was at work prior to the eruption of the protests. While a widespread literature has highlighted the spontaneous nature of the 2011 protests in the MENA region, this study also highlights the crucial role of coordination that groups with different degrees of formalization did play, often in interconnection with each other.

Results show that, while several organizations were not actively engaged in political activities, thus proving ineffective for their members' political participation in protests, as in the case of ETUF, other organizations like charities and apolitical organizations did provide the structural basis and those free spaces for people to engage politically. This occurred, for instance, thanks to the links that established organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood provided with more informal groups, like the Popular Committees. Likewise, more spontaneous and loosely structured groups equally provided those resources, links and ties for more structured and established organizations to emerge, as occurred for self-organized workers' groups which eventually institutionalized into EFITU.

Consequently, loosely organized groups were closely linked with more coordinated or established organizations, groups renovated their forms, and individuals mixed formal membership with informal ties, and were ready to pass from loosely structured groups into established organizations and vice versa. Several members of the Muslim Brotherhood and *Salafi* groups eventually engaged in political forms of action thanks to their involvement in more loosely structured forms like Popular Committees. Likewise, but in the opposite direction, when protests broke out in January 2011 self-organized workers' groups converged into an established coordinating body through the legalization of EFITU. Evidence of similar processes has been found in other repressive contexts. The 2013 Gezi Park protests, the largest civilian uprisings in the last decade in Turkey, which began in late May and lasted until September 2013, was initially a spontaneous revolt. However, Gezi Park became a focal point for a larger movement composed of a diversity of groups and organizations such as, inter alia, workers, unions, student organizations, and non-Turkish organizations (Anisin, 2016: 415). Furthermore,

'new activist groups emerged and stemmed from the original Taksim Solidarity movement such as Occupy Gezi Park' (Anisin, 2016: 423). Likewise, the 2016 mass protests in Poland against a bill that would impose criminal sanctions on abortion, were largely mobilized in online and informal spaces, but they also succeeded in getting women out on the streets through the presence of more formal pro-choice groups (cf. Soon and Cho [2014] for a similar dialectic between different spaces of mobilization in Singapore).⁴³

In light of this evidence, future research may strengthen the comparative dimension of the results examining protests in neighboring countries. In addition, while our findings clarify the importance of considering the variety of groups, research may investigate further how groups with different organizational forms can eventually support different type of actions. The type and scope of collective actions that more informal, small and loosely structured groups can engage in are likely to differ from the type of collective actions promoted by organizations. This had been already discussed by Melucci (1996), who drew attention to the presence and activities of informal groups in the so-called new social movements of the 1980s. As studied by Melucci, informal groups acting together tend to form a segmented, reticular and multifaceted, often loose, network structure. Due to these characteristics, they can promote collective actions. However, the latter risk being too often narrow in scope and grounded at the local level. The networks built by the new social movements indeed profoundly differed from the image of the networks formed by politically organized actors. The strength of informal groups and networks lies precisely in their provision of flexibility, adaptability, and immediacy, which more structured organizations cannot incorporate (Melucci, 1985: 800; 1996: 115). While these characteristics are of utmost importance for actors in repressive contexts, they can also become weaknesses to the degree that collective actions promoted by such groups cannot be easily coordinated on a large scale, cumulative and sustained for a long time, an aspect typical of the dynamics of social movements (cf. Tilly, 1978). Indeed, in the Egyptian case, only after the institutionalization of workers' spontaneous groups through the establishment of EFITU, were workers able to coordinate national level strikes throughout the first half of 2011 and later on, far beyond parochial and local actions. More specifically, only after the set up of EFITU and the approval of the law on the legalization of independent trade unions, from April to September 2011, was there a rapid expansion of labor organizations, a spread of independent unions in Mahalla al-Kubra, and the strikes of September 2011, rather than occurring as isolated and in fragmented workplaces, were supported by 500,000 workers nationwide (Alexander and Bassiouny, 2014: 213).

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Notes

1. We refer to organizational forms but we intend both organizations and groups.
2. Tilly (1978: 62–63) discussed this mechanism through the concept of CATNET, a synthesis of *catness* and *netness*. While the former identifies the presence of an aggregate of individuals defined by specific external categorical traits, the latter identifies the presence of stable relationships. Through the concept of CATNET Tilly discusses the relationships which facilitate the passage from a social category to a social group capable of acting intentionally. Thanks to the presence of intense and durable relations between individuals with common external categorical traits, social categories can transform into social groups and act collectively.
3. Not all authors agree on the mobilizing role of online ties (Brym et al., 2014). Hassanpour (2014) shows that protest increased in the period when the internet was switched off, 28 January 2011, while Clarke (2014) argues that social media helped during the first day but had a negligible impact thereafter.
4. These interviews are part of a large fieldwork research which comprised several methodological techniques, including focus groups and fieldwork notes. We chose to rely on the material drawn from the interviews because it provided the richest information for the specific aims of this study.
5. Interviewees 7, 8 and 12, Cairo.
6. Interviewees 3, 7, 8 and 12, Cairo.
7. Interviews 14, 15, Mahalla al-Kubra.
8. The repression strongly affected the workings of independent trade unions that have been officially banned in 2017. See <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/64634> (accessed 28 July 2020).
9. Interviewee 42, Cairo.
10. Interviewee 35, Cairo.
11. Interviewee 7, Cairo.
12. Interviewee 2, Cairo.
13. Interviewee 1, Cairo.
14. Interviewee 4, Cairo.
15. Interviewee 1, Cairo.
16. Interviewee 3, Cairo.
17. Interviewee 5, Cairo.
18. Interviewees 7 and 8, Cairo.
19. Interviewee 3, Cairo.
20. Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 6 and 7, Cairo.
21. Interviewees 4 and 5, Cairo.
22. Interviewees 1, 2, 3, 7 and 8, Cairo.
23. Interviewee 2, Cairo.
24. Interviewee 3, Cairo.
25. Interviewees 4 and 5, Cairo.
26. Ibid.
27. Interviewee 7, Cairo.
28. Interviewee 4, Cairo.
29. Interviewees 1 to 8, Cairo.
30. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/50540> (accessed 31 July 2020).

31. www.madamasr.com/sections/politics/whatever-happened-egypts-independent-unions (accessed 10 May 2016).
32. Interviewees 15, 18 and 17, Mahalla al-Kubra.
33. Interviewee 19, Mahalla al-Kubra.
34. Interviewees 20, 21 and 22, Mahalla al-Kubra.
35. Interviewees 23 and 27, Mahalla al-Kubra.
36. Interviewee 15, Mahalla al-Kubra.
37. Interviewee 18, Mahalla al-Kubra.
38. Interviewee 14, Mahalla al-Kubra.
39. Interviewee 16, Mahalla al-Kubra.
40. Popular Committees, workers' groups, members of organizations such as *Kifaya* or the Revolutionary Socialists were not the only groups active in the 2011 protests. Evidence also shows that on 25 January 2011, the starting day of the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, a march of 10,000 people was led by the leader of the al-Ahly football fan club league in Cairo and during the 18-day occupation of Tahrir Square, the ultras also patrolled the perimeters of the square and controlled entry (Dorsey, 2012: 414).
41. Interviewee 22, Mahalla al-Kubra.
42. Interviewee 22, Mahalla al-Kubra.
43. Nawrkoicz Kasia Czarny Protest: how Polish women took to the streets www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/czarny-protest-how-polish-women-took-to-streets/ (accessed 31 May 2020).

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Résumé

Cet article examine le rôle de divers groupes sociaux dans la formation des mouvements de protestation dans des contextes répressifs. Notre étude empirique se concentre sur les soulèvements qui ont débuté en janvier 2011 en Égypte. Nous utilisons les données recueillies par deux groupes de discussion menés entre 2011 et 2015 auprès de 58 personnes qui avaient toutes participé à ces manifestations et qui étaient membres de différents types d'organisations préexistantes. Les résultats montrent que, contrairement aux thèses mettant en avant le caractère spontané des manifestations de 2011 dans les pays d'Afrique du Nord et du Moyen-Orient et le rôle qu'y a joué l'Internet, l'appartenance des contestataires à des organisations comme les Frères musulmans et à des groupes plus informels tels que des « comités populaires » ou à des syndicats indépendants a joué un rôle déterminant dans leur participation aux manifestations. Les résultats mettent également en évidence le caractère flexible et dynamique des organisations actives dans des contextes de répression, ce qui leur donne la capacité de réagir et de s'adapter plus facilement à un contexte changeant que les organisations qui opèrent dans des démocraties établies.

Mots-clés

Contextes répressifs, groupes informels, organisations, protestations, soulèvement de 2011

Resumen

Este artículo examina el papel de varios grupos sociales en la configuración de las protestas en contextos represivos. El estudio empírico se centra en los levantamientos egipcios iniciados en enero de 2011. Se utilizan datos recopilados a través de dos grupos focales realizados entre 2011 y 2015 con 58 personas que habían participado en tales protestas y que eran miembros de varios tipos de organizaciones preexistentes. Los resultados muestran que, en contraste con los argumentos que resaltan la naturaleza espontánea y la difusión a través de Internet de las protestas ocurridas en 2011 en la región de MENA (Oriente Medio y Norte de África), la

pertenencia de los individuos a organizaciones como los Hermanos Musulmanes y a grupos más informales como los Comités Populares o a sindicatos independientes, ha sido fundamental para explicar su participación en las protestas. Los resultados también destacan la forma flexible y dinámica de las organizaciones activas en contextos represivos, que son capaces de reaccionar y adaptarse más fácilmente a un contexto cambiante en comparación con las que operan en las democracias establecidas.

Palabras clave

Contextos represivos, grupos informales, levantamiento de 2011, organizaciones, protesta