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Mobilization, Repression, and Coalitions: Understanding the Dynamics of the Arab Spring

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Cilja Harders, Christoph J. König

Abstract

In this article, we begin with the puzzle of how the 2011 mass mobilizations in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen could happen, and how they could be sustained in some cases but not in others. The grievances of Arab societies caused by the lingering political, social, and economic crises, which are highlighted in many accounts of the Arab uprisings, have been well known for more than a decade. We hold that these “old crises” cannot account for the wave of “new protests,” and structuralist approaches, which focus on regime stability or changes in political opportunity structures, cannot sufficiently account for these major events. In light of quite stable political opportunity structures, we argue that specific actors and their choices provide the answer to the puzzle. They are crucial in order to account for the variations in degree, trajectory, and outcome of mobilization observed since the spring of 2011. We propose studying anti-regime coalitions, in particular their framing activities and their dynamic interactions with various agents of repression, as key to understanding the success or failure of mass mobilization in authoritarian contexts. Building on the quite different cases of Egypt and Bahrain, we show the ways in which similar conflict dynamics set in motion by anti-regime coalitions can play out differently. We argue that both the choice to violently repress protest and the choice by anti-regime activists to escalate protests sometimes backfire. The contingencies of revolutionary trajectories derive in large part from such unintended effects. By closely tracing the situational interaction dynamics with our proposed analytical focus and concepts, the empirical investigation can account for some of these contingencies, which were crucial to the outcomes of the respective episodes of mass mobilization.

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1. Introduction

The sudden appearance of mass protests against authoritarian regimes, which seemed to spread like a wave from Tunisia after December 2010, caught most scholars by surprise. They pose some major puzzles for students of movements and revolutions as well as area specialists. The grievances of Arab societies caused by the lingering political, social, and economic crises, which are highlighted in many accounts of the Arab uprisings, have been well known for more than a decade. We hold that these “old crises” cannot account for the wave of “new protest.” Moreover, structuralist approaches, which focus on regime stability or changes in political opportunity structures, cannot sufficiently account for these major events: If neither the composition of regime elites nor the polities themselves have undergone significant changes allowing for more citizen participation, and if the capacities of the coercive apparatuses have not declined over the past decade, how were the 2011 mass mobilizations in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen possible, and why could they be sustained in some cases but not in others? Why did no mass mobilization occur in Algeria, even though the country has seen high levels of everyday protests and rioting for more than two years now? Why did the protest movements in Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq, and the smaller events in the Gulf countries, not develop into mass protest?

In light of quite stable political opportunity structures, we argue that specific actors and their choices provide the answer to the puzzle. They are crucial in order to account for the variations in degree, trajectory, and outcome of mobilization observed since the spring of 2011. We propose studying anti-regime coalitions, along with their dynamic interactions with various agents of repression, as key elements to understand the success or failure of mass mobilization in authoritarian contexts.

The importance of broad coalitions of opposition groups to revolutionary situations and trajectories is widely acknowledged (Goldstone 2001; Beissinger 2011: 40). But rarely are these coalitions themselves at the center of analysis. McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001: chap 7), for example, note that the appearance of “coalitions of contenders” is a feature of revolutionary situations, but echo transitologists in explaining revolutionary trajectories through elite defections from the regime. Additionally, only few movement scholars have studied the formation of coalitions by different groups at all (McCammon/Campbell 2002). And those who have, have mainly studied groups that belong to the same movement family, such as environmental groups (Park 2008; Poloni-Staudinger 2009) or various groups within the leftist-alternative spectrum (Carroll/Ratner 1996; Gerhards/Rucht 1992).

We argue that the existence and resilience of broad coalitions can explain the differences in mobilization and outcome that have occurred in the Arab World over the last two years. In order to substantiate this claim, we look first at the relevance of coalitions for mobilization and ask how existing cleavages and ideological gaps are surmounted in divided societies. We argue that frames are of specific importance here because they can serve as an empirical indicator of a movement actor’s

capability to create a degree of coherence and solidarity. Furthermore, in authoritarian contexts, (violent) repression is of major importance for both individual and collective actors' choices to engage in costly and dangerous activities, such as protest and movement dynamics. Repression in these contexts includes material and discursive strategies and can range from massive police violence to co-optation or even paying citizens off for political acquiescence, such as in Kuwait. Thus, we suggest looking beyond the policing of protests and the expression of physical violence against protesters, on which much empirical research on movement repression in Europe and the United States has focused (della Porta/Reiter 1998; Ayoub 2010; Earl 2003; Davenport 2005).

Looking at coalitions and repression thus serves as both an explanatory key to the question of success or failure of mobilization and a feasible entry point into the empirically grounded study of the quite untidy, chaotic, and contingent dynamics of revolutionary trajectories. The following article will lay out in more detail the concepts we use for our analysis, i.e., mobilization by coalitions, collective action frames as discursive weapons of anti-regime coalitions, and our understanding of repression as material and discursive phenomena.

In order to show that the logics of interaction are similar even across such diverse states and societies, we propose examining two very different cases in more depth. Egypt serves as an ideal example of a large Arab state with comparably minor social cleavages, which lacks the resources (oil revenues) to quell protests by offering material benefits. The small island state of Bahrain, in contrast, belongs to the group of gulf countries with relatively extensive resources. At the same time, it has much in common with states like Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Libya in terms of socio-religious cleavages. But most importantly, the degree of sustained mobilization for protest has to be explained in both cases, because both protest campaigns were challenged by diverse acts of repression from the initial stages of mobilization. The case discussions will further reveal the ways in which similar conflict dynamics set in motion by anti-regime coalitions can still play out differently. We argue that both the choice to violently repress protest and the choice by anti-regime activists to escalate protests sometimes backfire. The contingencies of revolutionary trajectories derive in large part from such unintended effects. By closely tracing the situational interaction dynamics with the proposed analytical focus and concepts, the empirical investigation can account for some of these contingencies that were crucial to the outcomes of the respective episodes of mass mobilization. Thus, the different outcomes of the two mass mobilizations, i.e. toppling the head of state in Egypt but not in Bahrain, cannot simply be attributed to different structural contexts. They are in large part the result of conscious choices made by opposition groups, the strategies of repression employed by the regime, and other societal forces activated by the anti-regime protests.

The case studies build on detailed and descriptive accounts by close observers and area experts, which were published in short proximity to the events. These types of accounts are provided by the International Crisis Group (ICG) on the basis

of newspaper reports, field interviews, and longtime expertise. For the case study of Bahrain, the report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI), which was established by the king of Bahrain in June 2011, proved to be a valuable source of information due to its meticulous descriptions. In addition, we assembled Arabic and English articles published online in national newspapers, and used them to crosscheck and validate the available information. Furthermore, our account of the events is based on innumerable informal talks with activists and close observers from across the region, conducted mostly in Egypt, Morocco, and Germany. Finally, we draw on online and printed analyses by the Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP) and the independent “e-zine” *Jadaliyya*, which is produced by the Arab Studies Institute (ASI), as well as some smaller articles by pertinent experts published in the US weekly journal, *The Nation*. The latter three sources provide some of the most empirically rich, critical, and astute analyses that have been published to date. But for the most part, this literature consists of single-country studies, and thus lacks the comparative perspective we suggest here. This article tries to fill this empirical and analytical gap by advancing a comparative perspective that is sensitive to the specific authoritarian contexts in which the anti-regime movements developed. We link a broad conception of repression to major findings in social movement research on the relevance of coalitions and framing, in order to adapt these concepts to the authoritarian contexts of the mass protests at hand.

The article begins by critically assessing a range of scientific explanations for the recent wave mass mobilizations in the states of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. After that, it will develop the argument in more detail, elaborating on the importance and difficulties of coalition formation and maintenance in authoritarian contexts. This second section will briefly introduce the analytical concepts, which will be applied in the third section to an analysis of anti-regime coalitions in early 2011 in the two different but paradigmatic political settings of Bahrain and Egypt.

2. Prevalent approaches to the study of politics in the MENA region, and the challenge of explaining the 2011 mass mobilizations

There seems to be little controversy among researchers about the underlying causes of the 2011 upheavals: high rates of unemployment and poverty—in many places exacerbated by the effects of the global financial crisis—in particular among the large population segment of young people, combined with widespread corruption among representatives of the state, harsh repression by state security services, and various forms of discrimination against religious, ethnic, or political groups within the respective societies. All of these factors have been prevalent across the region (Joffé 2011; Pillar 2011). However, the grievances of Arab societies caused by these lingering political, social, and economic crises have been well known for more than a decade (UNDP 2005; Kienle 2003). And the very fact that none of the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region had witnessed anything even close to revolutionary upheaval in the 1990s and 2000s had led researchers, especially the political scientists among the area experts, to look for the particular regime characteristics that rendered Arab autocracies stable.

The seemingly paradoxical resilience of authoritarian regimes quickly became a research paradigm, and those scholars who adhered to it identified a range of factors at work that—until December 2010—effectively prevented the emergence of large-scale upheavals. Prominent explanations pointed to the strength of the coercive apparatuses (Bellin 2004; Hafez 2006; Schwedler 2005), stabilizing elite rotation and co-optation (Perthes 2004), the institutional settings of Arab autocracies which facilitate the maintenance of stable, pro-regime “winning coalitions” (Gandhi/Lust-Okar 2009; Gandhi/Przeworski 2007) as well as other forms of “authoritarian upgrading” (Heydemann 2007; Schlumberger 2007), and rentier economies (Beck 2009; Beblawi/Luciani 1987). A further significant factor is the support that Arab autocrats have received (and in most cases continue to receive) from big international players, most notably the United States and the European Union (Harders/Legrenzi 2008; Korany/Dessouki 2008).

The unexpected toppling of longtime rulers Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt in early 2011, as well as similar events in Yemen and the more violent overthrow of the Gaddafi regime in Libya, seriously challenge these rather statist explanations and the stability paradigm as such (Arbeitsstelle 2011). More critical approaches to area studies, which can be subsumed under a second, contending paradigm labeled “politics from below” (Bayart et al. 1992), highlights the manifold abilities of people to adapt to, resist, and even challenge centrally institutionalized modes of (repressive) governance. These include the “weapons of the weak” (Scott 1985), “acting as if” (Wedeen 1999, 2008), or the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary” (Bayat 1997). The analyses of (everyday) practices on the local level, which take place through widespread family, ethnic, social, and economic networks (Singerman 1995; Bayat 2007; Harders 2002; Bouziane 2010; Lenner/Vermaelen 2012),

also indicate the self-limiting nature of such subversion, since informal practices actually contribute to regime stability (Bayat 1997, Singerman/Amar 2006, Harders/Bouziane forthcoming). The “analysis of the state from below” (Harders 2002, 2003) thus draws a more complex picture of the dynamic and contradictory relationship between state and society, which is captured by notions such as “state in society” (Migdal 2004) or the “everyday state” (Ismail 2006, Hibou 2006). These analyses have been somewhat disconnected from the few attempts to apply social movement approaches to cases in the region (Wictorovitz 2004, Albrecht 2010, El Mahdi 2009, Vairel/Beinin 2011), as they emphasize the fact that public mobilization or social movements are quite rare in repressive contexts. Nonetheless, the former body of literature provides rich and detailed accounts of the political experience and agency of ordinary people, as well as of the manifold strategies of individuals and local groups to act in the context of authoritarian rule. It also reveals the link between individual experiences and motivations to participate in collective action against a regime. These experiences and underlying motivations, in turn, are tapped by movement activists in their efforts to stage protests.

Journalists and scholars alike have been keen to highlight the growing influence of new media, especially satellite television and web 2.0 spaces, and advancements in communication technologies in shaping people’s perceptions and facilitating the organization of public protest by breaking authoritarian regimes’ control of media outlets (Howard/Hussain 2011; Cannistraro 2011; Bellin 2012). While these new technologies may have been convenient tools for a certain share of protesters (mainly urban youth and young middle-class professionals), the role of both technology and young urban cosmopolitans should not be overstated. In line with debates in social movement research on the impact of digital media on mobilization (Earl/Soule 2010; Van Laer 2010; Walgrave et al. 2011), the more diligent analyses of the Tahrir Data Project (Wilson/Dunn 2011) on media use in the Egyptian mass mobilizations suggest that the role played by new information and communication technologies is much more complex.

A more convincing (though empirically somewhat questionable) account of the 2011 mass mobilizations is provided by Joffé (2011). Against the socio-economic backdrop delineated above, Joffé re-considers the regime-stability literature, referring to the notion and allegedly particular nature of “liberalized autocracies,” which “set up the conditions for their own demise by creating space for the evolution of autonomous precursor movements—ostensibly under regime control—which, in the right conditions, could evolve into movements of political contention. [...] these precursor movements only required an appropriate catalyst to expand into social movements, directly contesting the power of the regime” (ibid.: 517). This explanation draws on the concepts developed in social movement research, most notably resource mobilization and collective action frames by opponents of the regime. In these respects, it is highly valuable; it stresses the agency of existing dissident groups or movements in mobilizing the 2011 mass protests. However, we challenge

the argument that the partial liberalizations of Arab autocracies first created political opportunities allowing for mass mobilization against the regime.

First, research on the development of civil society in Arab autocracies has shown that the respective regimes were quite effective in co-opting, steering, or controlling the NGO scene (Ben Nefissa et al. 2005), in usurping internationally promoted discourses of human rights (Amar 2011), and in playing social movements off against each other (Cavatorta 2007). Joffé acknowledges this when he argues that the 2011 mass movements owe their materialization first and foremost to the morphing of previously co-opted “precursor movements,” i.e. the only type of movement that could arguably be formed in “liberalized autocracies.” But his argument is not consistent for some of the cases he refers to, for example the Kefaya and April 6 Youth movements in Egypt can hardly be equated with the members of official parties and NGOs under indirect or direct regime control.

Second, Joffé’s explanation rests on the notion of a particular type of repressive regime, and thus on (objective) political opportunities created by certain regimes as opposed to others. The characteristics of the regimes across the region certainly display important differences, which have to be taken into account. Other observers have, for example, pointed to differences in characteristics of the regimes’ armed forces, as well as their varying willingness to repress the mass protests (Barany 2011; Bellin 2012) or their varying capacities “to learn from and adapt to the rapidly emerging challenges that mass uprisings posed for regime survival” (Heydemann/Leenders 2011: 648). But at the outset, even the most “liberalized” systems had still been characterized by exclusive political rule, elite cohesion, and, most of all, unchanged capacities to repress dissent. We argue that none of the key factors stressed in the narrow definition of political opportunity structures have shown significant changes that would account for the 2011 mass mobilizations: i.e., the political openness of a polity to new actors, the cohesion among the group of regime elites, the availability of elite allies, and the capacities or will of a regime to repress dissent (McAdam 1996: 132; Tarrow 1998: 76; Meyer 2004). This is in line with recent reflections on the applicability of social movement theories to non-Western authoritarian contexts. These have concluded that in highly repressive contexts, even the opening of opportunity structures does not necessarily facilitate mobilization (Alimi 2009: 233, Vairel/Beinin 2011).

3. Understanding the Arab Spring through the lens of coalition-repression-dynamics

Our starting point is thus the rejection of structuralist logics because they cannot convincingly explain the great degree of variation in protest developments in 2011 and 2012, which took place in similar environments of economic crisis and political closure. They cannot explain why protest occurred in some countries but not in others, and why some protest campaigns lasted until demands were fulfilled, while others faded without having made significant achievements.

Arab states show great variation with regard to regime type (presidential republics, monarchies, or power-sharing democracies), economic revenue (mainly dependent on the availability of oil rents, and to a lesser extent the strength of national economies), country and/or population size (large and small), and the ethnic and/or religious composition of their societies. Additionally, other countries (Palestine, Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Algeria) are characterized by the legacies of severe internal conflicts. Regarding the logics of contentious politics, these countries differ markedly from countries that have not experienced comparable degrees of armed struggle.¹ A cursory look at the degrees and outcomes of mobilization in 2011 and 2012 indicates that there is no clear pattern that would match any of the structural dimensions. Large but overtly peaceful protests have led to toppling the heads of state in the small republic of Tunisia, with a comparatively high GDP per capita,² and in the large republic of Egypt. The president of the poor, conflict-ridden and socially fragmented republic of Yemen also eventually stepped down. The equally large degree of mobilization in the republic of Syria, by contrast, which is similar to Yemen in terms of population size and societal cleavages, has not succeeded in ousting President Assad. Even worse, the interaction dynamics have escalated into an ongoing, full-scale civil war. The same happened in the oil-rich and socially fragmented republic of Libya, although the NATO intervention helped the rebel army to overthrow the former regime (which should be regarded as a construct *sui generis* rather than similar to other Arab republics). What many observers have downplayed or failed to notice is that the other North African oil-rich republic, Algeria, witnessed intense protest in the beginning of 2011 as well. However, no concerted efforts to challenge the Bouteflika regime emerged from these protests, probably due to omnipresent memories of the devastating civil war in the 1990s (Belakhdar 2011).

At first glance, only the republics seem to have been seriously challenged by protest movements. However, in the oil-rich gulf monarchies of Oman and Kuwait, as well as in the oil-importing monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, protest cam-

1 This might be the only convincing structural variable if one wanted to construct one. But it also only seems to explain low degrees of mobilization (due to the war experience), with the notable exception of Yemen.

2 GDP per capita serves as a main indicator to assess the state of development and conflict potential of a country in peace and conflict studies. The numbers here are taken from "World Development Indicators 2011" as listed by the UNDP (source: <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/indicators/20206.html> [retrieved: 12.12.2012]).

paigns provoked governmental changes. Kienle (2012: 67) states that “the monarchies managed to absorb more limited contestation by moderate adjustments that reconfigure or ‘upgrade’ authoritarian rule.” But a closer analysis of the protests in Jordan and Morocco reveals a new quality of challenge to the regimes, marked by broader coalitions of opposition groups and their crossing of red lines in political discourse—most notably the outspoken critique of the two kings and the monarchical systems as such (Hoffmann/König 2013). Minor protests took place in the largest gulf kingdom, Saudi Arabia. But the protest dynamics that unfolded in neighboring Bahrain bear similarities with those in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, and brought the country to the brink of civil war. Finally, also the formally democratic, conflict-ridden countries of Lebanon, Iraq, and the occupied Palestinian territories have seen protests denouncing governmental mismanagement, which resulted in a change of government in one case (Lebanon). Thus, the picture becomes blurred.

To generate explanations capable of accounting for these differences and at the same time sensitive to contingent events within processes of mass mobilization in authoritarian contexts, we propose examining more closely the interactions between opponents and supporters of the respective regime. This means adopting an actor-centered perspective interested in the agency reflected in strategic choices taken by individual or collective actors based on their beliefs and perceptions of the situation. In other words, people—individually or collectively—choose to “pursue one flow of action rather than another, respond in one way to events rather than in others” (Jasper 2004: 2). As the culturalist trend in research on movements and revolutions has shown, people make these choices on the basis of their beliefs and perceptions of their chances to effectively push for change in entrenched autocracies (Kurzman 1996; Kenney 2001). The outcomes of revolutionary power struggles emerge from interactions in which both supporters and challengers of a regime make choices and react to the choices taken by the respective opponent (McAdam/Tarrow/Tilly 2001: 225). That said, the kind of challenger we propose studying are broad anti-regime coalitions, i.e. alliances of autonomous opposition groups or movements that cooperate to pursue a common objective. These coalitions are challenged by the supporters of the regime, including the members of the regime itself, who for this reason can be regarded as agents of repression.

Scholars have noted that “multiclass coalitions” were a central feature of the revolutions³ in Nicaragua and Iran in 1979, the Philippines in 1986, Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union between 1989 and 1991, as well as in many of the struggles against colonial and dictatorial rule in Africa and Asia (Goldstone 2001: 141). In a similar vein, the literature on nonviolent resistance (Schock 2005) stresses the

3 Against the longtime standard definition of social revolutions as “rapid, basic transformations of a society’s state and class structures ... accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below” (Skocpol 1979:4), Goldstone (2001: 142) suggests working with a “broader and more contemporary definition of revolution: an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in a society, accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization and non-institutionalized actions that undermine existing authorities.”

importance of broad coalitions of opposition groups. Such coalitions are considered crucial for mobilization, movement resilience against repression, and outcome for several inter-related reasons: First, by forming a coalition, the previously unconnected networks and resources of opposition groups are linked together, thus boosting their capacities to mobilize for sustained protest campaigns and large-scale disruptive activities, for example general strikes, that are challenging to a regime also in economic terms. Second, it is more difficult for regimes to denounce and repress broad-based movements than isolated protests carried out by particular classes of groups and designed to articulate their own interests. Third, the more an anti-regime coalition manages to represent the whole society, the more it undermines a regime's claim to legitimate rule. Finally, in the face of persistent mass protests, splits among the ruling elites and the military, as well as ensuing support for the opposition by former members and allies of the regime, both nationally and internationally, becomes more likely—the result of which may well be the toppling of the regime (Goldstone 2011: 457; Parsa 2000: 239).⁴

Therefore, an empirical analysis has to start by identifying (autonomous) groups with a certain history of opposition towards the regime. This acknowledges the importance that proponents of the resource mobilization approach in social movement theory have attributed to “preexisting organization and integration of those segments of a population which share preferences” (McCarthy/Zald 1977: 1218). The formation of coalitions between such preexisting groups thus boosts the strength of the protest movement. Of course, previous instances of coalition formation and learning processes among core activists are important to fully grasp how, for example, the broad coalitions comprised of Islamists, radical leftists, and liberals, as well as of educated, urban, middle-class and industrial workers could materialize in Egypt in early 2011. Unfortunately, a more thorough appreciation of episodes of mass mobilization in the past decade is beyond the scope of this article. Yet, the case discussions will reveal that the situational day-to-day dynamics of 2011 still account for much of the formation, and even more so, the persistence of coalitions.

Formation of a coalition and its maintenance over time are challenging tasks for opponents of the regime to tackle “because of the existence of disparate interests and ideologies in any society at any point in time” (Parsa 2000: 22). Coalitions normally have to bridge societal cleavages and inter-group antagonism. The political systems in Arab autocracies are cases in point, for they host a variety of opposition groups with contending and even antagonistic outlooks, such as Islamist and Marxist ideologies, in addition to prevalent class-based, identity-based, and gender-based cleavages. Shared grievances cannot be regarded as a sufficient condition for

4 The strength of nonviolent protest campaigns has been highlighted by the results of recent quantitative investigations that challenge long-held opinions of conflict researchers about the effectiveness of violence in political struggles. The statistical evidence of Chenoweth and Stephan (2011: 7) indicates that between 1900 and 2006, nonviolent resistance campaigns were almost twice as successful as their violent counterparts.

coalition formation, but rather as an underlying motivation.⁵ In order to generate agency-based explanations for why certain coalitions materialize in some contexts at particular points in time, this paper examines the conscious efforts by activists in preexisting movements to address these grievances by issuing calls for protest that are likely to be supported by other movements as well. Social movement scholars have pointed to “master frames” (Carroll/Ratner 1996; Gerhards/Rucht 1992; Snow/Benford 1992), which promote cross-movement activism through a common language that allows different groups from various segments of society to link their specific concerns to the meta-narrative. This means that master frames may help overcome societal cleavages, at least until a common goal is achieved.

Collective action frames serve as discursive “weapons” (Donati 2001: 151f.) for social movements and their activists, who actively “frame, or assign meaning to and interpret relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists” (Snow 2004: 384). Framing thus intends to capture the discursive sphere of meaning construction. It is within this sphere that (structural) grievances or particular occurrences have to be addressed, assigned with meaning, and made salient in order to motivate people to engage in protest activities. The construction of a frame, whether in a discursive or strategic, goal-oriented process, generally involves the “connection and alignment of events and experiences” that puts forward in a compelling way a new “angle of vision” (Benford/Snow 2000: 623ff.). Pertinent slogans and symbols serve the task of punctuating issues, beliefs, or certain events from this new perspective, helping to increase the salience of the frame. In this respect, the main slogan of the Arab uprisings, “ash-shaab yurid isqat al nizam” (the people want to topple the system/order) is a very good example of the successful invention of a slogan that developed local, regional, and even global resonance.

The third relevant aspect is the kind of repression that protesters are facing. As more recent research on movements in Arab autocracies has stressed, it is crucial to consider systematically the impact of the authoritarian context and the forms of repression exercised by regime agents on the character and extent of protest (Beinin/Vairel 2011). The fact that violent repression in particular has been found to be commonplace in Arab states (UNDP 2009) further underscores this imperative. Repression influences the strategies of mobilization for protest, as well as the particular protest tactics performed in public; at the same time, the challenges to regimes mounted by protesters determine, at least to a certain extent, the type of repression exercised by those regimes (Davenport 2005; Tilly/Tarrow 2007: 48). In short, repression and mobilization interact with each other.

5 Interestingly, the argument by Goldstone (2011: 460) that “shared enmity toward a hated dictator” (more than grievances) brought about the anti-regime coalitions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya appears to suffer from just the same weakness: emotions and attitudes may qualify as psycho-social motivation in many cases, but they fall short of explaining why only at certain points in time and in certain locations are processes initiated that build up the capacities to mount a serious challenge.

This interaction also directly affects coalition formation. Pitting societal groups against each other is an essential strategy that serves incumbent (authoritarian) regimes in maintaining power. Thus, overcoming divide-and-rule strategies is a highly relevant and difficult task for opposition actors. On the level of coalition resilience, this principle also materializes in the strategies of repression. Understanding related regime actions, such as granting a certain group access to power or material benefits while excluding others, as part of the phenomenon of repression demands a broader understanding of the term. In his critical discussion of the conceptual literature on repression, Rogers (2011: 15) concludes that “the spectrum of repressive actions ranges far beyond arrests and torture to include negotiation, claim-making, counter-mobilisation, and the redress of grievances.” For the purpose of this article, repression is defined as any (formal or informal, violent or nonviolent) action that aims to hamper mobilizing for protest in general, and prevents the formation of larger anti-regime coalitions in particular. Repression can be exercised by any actor(s) affiliated with an incumbent regime, including elites in the political and economic centers of power, as well as local government officials, members of the state security services, and societal counter-movements or groups that side with the regime.

To sum up, we propose focusing on actor coalitions, frames, and various forms of activities that aim to hinder mobilization, in order to analyze the development of regime–opposition interactions. Once formed, anti-regime coalitions have to persist in the ensuing conflict with state security services and pro-regime groups in order to achieve their common goals. As the case discussions will show, this conflict takes places in two interrelated spheres: the physical sphere of direct interactions at particular locations; and the discursive sphere of meaning construction, where contenders struggle to secure the legitimacy of their causes. The latter sphere can adequately be grasped through the concept of framing, as the broad definition of repression includes acts of counter-framing by agents of repression. By identifying the activities of anti-regime and pro-regime forces in both spheres, the analytical approach aims to better account for some of the unintended effects of certain choices, which become important impulses in subsequent interaction dynamics. The case studies will show that the “backfire effect” is of special relevance to the dynamics of contestation and coalition building in Egypt and Bahrain.

4. Anti-regime coalitions, mass mobilization, and repression in Bahrain and Egypt 2011

4.1 Contextualizing mobilization

The small island kingdom of Bahrain had a population of about 1.3 million people in 2011. In 2000, its population numbered roughly 640,000 (UNDP 2011a); the country has seen rapid population growth over the past decade. However, less than half of the population are Bahraini nationals, with Asian migrant workers making up the vast majority of non-Bahraini residents. It is estimated that 70 percent of the population are adherents to Shiite Islam, with only 30 percent being Sunnis, the religious identity of the ruling Al-Khalifa family.⁶ The majority Shiite population is considered structurally disadvantaged both economically and politically (ICG 2011a: 1f). As a result, these sectarian lines are frequently invoked in Bahraini politics. Adding further strain to the sectarian dimension of politics in Bahrain is the rivalry between two regional powers: Saudi Arabia, which is governed by an Arabic and Sunni (Wahabi) royal family, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, headed by a Persian, Shiite religious scholar. Within the regional context, the (Sunni) Al-Khalifa monarchy is thus backed by Saudi Arabia and the other members to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), based on its claim to counter alleged attempts by Iran to undermine the Sunni regime in Bahrain via its Shiite population. Both the particular structure of the Bahraini society and the international context render it difficult for opposition activists to mobilize for broad-based anti-regime protests. The type of mass mobilization witnessed during the period between the “day of rage” on 14 February 2011 and the intervention of Saudi and GCC troops one month later is thus remarkable.

While Bahrain is considered by the UNDP to be a country of “very high human development” and is also above average among the Arab states listed, Egypt ranks in the group of “medium human development,” more or less representative of the mean among Arab states (UNDP 2011b). GDP per capita in 2008 was as high as 32,233 USD for Bahrain and only 5,011 USD for Egypt. Regime type and population size also differ markedly: by official counts, the Arab Republic of Egypt in 2011 had a population of more than 82.5 million people (UNDP 2011a), and until 11 February 2011 it was headed by President Hosni Mubarak. And although one cannot deny tensions and occasional sectarian strife between Sunni Muslims and Coptic Christians, the sectarian issue is not nearly as central to political discourse in Egypt as it is in Bahrain. Class, gender, and ideological cleavages seem to be equally salient. Finally, external influence on Egyptian politics seems to be limited mostly to foreign affairs, most notably Egypt’s policies toward the state of Israel and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The country’s main sponsors, the United States and the European Union,

6 This balance is a sensitive issue, and official numbers are therefore lacking. Apart from that, it is assumed that this balance may have shifted as a result of a government policy of naturalizing foreign workers who are adherents of Sunni Islam.

appeared to watch the Egyptian revolution in early 2011 unfold undecidedly, and have not interfered more actively.

4.2 A “day of anger” provoking a month of protest in Bahrain: The Pearl Square Revolt

Mobilization for what became the Bahraini version of the Arab upheavals surfaced with the appearance of new groups on the social network Facebook. One of these was launched on 4 February 2011 and was called “The Revolution of 14th February in Bahrain.” The webpage featured a call for protests on 14 February to demand social justice and publicly speak out against the “political naturalization” of foreigners, sectarian discrimination, and continuous arbitrary arrests.⁷ Its authors had purposely chosen the tenth anniversary of the 2001 referendum on the National Action Charter (NAC). The NAC had—though in vague terms—promised democratic reforms but was rendered meaningless in the eyes of the opposition when the king unilaterally and without prior debate announced a new constitution in February 2002. Only two days after the Facebook page had been launched, the Information Affairs Authority (IAA) blocked it in an obvious effort to repress mobilization. This step was immediately criticized in an online statement by the (officially banned) Bahrain Center for Human Rights (BCHR), which emphasized the demands for freedom of expression (BCHR, 6 February 2011). The dynamics of mobilization and repression had been set in motion.

Calls to join the protests on 14 February and demands for political, social, and economic reforms similar to those issued by the Facebook group continued circling online. Of the preexisting movements, it was mostly organizations with no official license, i.e. formally illegal opposition groups such as the (Shiite) Islamist al-Haq Movement for Liberties and Democracy, and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), that issued statements in support of the protests. Yet, on 13 February, the leftist National Democratic Action Society, Wa'ad, became the first legal opposition group to publicly declare that the youth had a right to protest. In addition, the secretary general of the largest legal Shiite opposition group, the pan-Islamist al-Wefaq Society, delivered Friday prayer sermons on 4 and 11 February in which he reportedly declared that “Al Wefaq’s position regarding the call for popular protests on 14 February was that the right to demonstrate was legally guaranteed and should be exercised peacefully” (BICI 2011: 66f.).

King Hamad bin Issa Al Khalifa responded to these mobilization activities by announcing that each Bahraini family would receive 1,000 dinars (about 2,650 USD) on the occasion of the anniversary of the National Action Charter (Al Jazeera, 12 February 2011). He thus employed a nonviolent strategy of repression, i.e. the attempt to buy political acquiescence, just as the rulers of Kuwait, Oman, and the UAE had done. In these cases, buying off citizens worked to discourage mobilization and

7 See: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/276676751317/> [retrieved 12.12.2012].

coalition formation, since many people seemed to accept the deal and act accordingly—that is, abstain from further public statements of discontent in demonstrations, petitions, or small sit-ins.

In Bahrain however, the move had little effect. On Monday, 14 February, more than 6,000 people—by official estimates (BICI 2011: 68)—followed the call for a “day of rage” and took to the streets in Manama and villages across the country. In their slogans, protesters stressed the legitimacy and strictly nonviolent nature of their protests, for example with the slogans, “Our movement is peaceful and our demands are legitimate” (The Guardian, 14 February 2011) and “We are not rioting, we are demanding our rights” (Global Voices, 14 February 2011). Importantly, protesters were keen to frame their actions and demands as non-sectarian and in the interest of the whole population. Stickers and badges ran the slogan, “No Shi’i, no Sunni, just Bahraini!” in an effort to also win the support of aggrieved Sunni Bahrainis, and to preemptively counter anticipated sectarian statements by regime members.

The violent response by the security services left a 21-year-old protester in a village east of Manama dead that day. When about 10,000 people joined the funeral procession the next day, riot police shot and killed one of the protesting mourners. Official accounts justify the use of firearms and live ammunition with the claim that the police forces had come under attack by demonstrators themselves. But these narratives are seriously contested (BICI 2011: 69f.; AI 2011). The immediate effect of violent repression on further mobilization has been noted by two close observers: “In retrospect [...] it is apparent that the two deaths transformed what were loosely coordinated protests into a more centralized and powerful movement. [...] At sunset on February 15, the crowd registered several thousand members, swelling further as the evening progressed” (Kerr/Jones 2011). Movement scholars are quite familiar with this “backfire” effect of harsh repression against overtly nonviolent protests (Schock 2005: 33). The “Pearl Square Revolt” can be regarded as a case in point, even more so when three more people were killed by gunshots on 17 February, when riot police stormed the protesters’ camp on the square at about 3 a.m. Another two lost their lives in subsequent confrontations, bringing the death toll to seven by 18 February, with hundreds more injured. But again, the crackdown sparked further protests by “Bahrainis from all walks of life [...] nurses, doctors, teachers, lawyers, human rights activists, bankers, students, unionized workers and more” (Kerr/Jones 2011), indicating that a certain degree of cross-class solidarity existed after four days of protest. As has also been noted in a report by the International Crisis Group, “[P]articularly because protesters limited demands to political and democratic reforms, refraining from directly criticising King Hamad, the harsh response surprised and radicalised many” (ICG 2011a: 6). Some of the slogans that were reportedly uttered on 17 February can be read as indicators of radicalization, for example, “Death to Khalifa!” (New York Times, 17 February 2011), and “Down with the king, down with the government!” (The Guardian, 17 February 2011). But a more important signal to the regime was sent by the resignation of eighteen members of parliament (MPs) associated with al-Wefaq, Bahrain’s largest legal Shiite opposition

group, along with further resignations by independent Shiite MPs. In addition, the General Federation of Bahrain Trade Unions (GFBTU) called for a general strike on 17 February following the second death of a protester.⁸ This is again indicative of a loose collaboration between organized labor and middle-class civil society activists, i.e., a coalition that is characteristic of many revolutionary situations. The pressure thus placed on the regime, which had called on the legal opposition groups to enter a dialogue in order to calm tensions, eventually led the Crown Prince to withdraw army troops guarding Pearl Square since the crackdown on 17 February, and demonstrators were allowed to enter the roundabout again on 19 February.

Protests continued, but the challenge to the regime mounted from then on appears to have been weakened by at least two factors. First, although a considerable number of preexisting licensed and unlicensed opposition groups with different ideological orientations engaged in mobilization, they did not manage to formulate a common goal and strategy. And second, sectarian discourses became more effective over the course of the following weeks when anti-regime protests were challenged by a strong counter-movement (in addition to security forces), and became more provocative themselves.

Within the first days of the protests, a coalition of seven legal Islamist and leftist opposition groups⁹ formed and declared their support of the “14 February Movement.” A joint statement released after the crackdown on 17 February demanded, among other things, the resignation of all cabinet members and the formation of a “national salvation cabinet” to supervise drafting a new constitution—and thus abolishing the 2002 constitution—as a solution to the crisis. This move was followed by the resignation mentioned above of al-Wefaq MPs (BICI 2011: 75). Further demands included the release of political prisoners, an independent investigation into the deaths of the seven protesters, and the neutrality of media coverage. The coalition of legal groups then sought to achieve these political reforms, which would, if implemented, result in a constitutional monarchy with a fully elected parliament through a national dialogue opened by the regime. However, their position was increasingly challenged by the unlicensed movements with “considerable street credibility” (ICG 2011a: 6), which refused to engage in any dialogue with the regime. This became clear when the al-Haq Movement and the Bahrain Islamic Freedom Movement (BIFM), together with the al-Wafaa Islamic Trend, formed the “Coalition for a Bahraini Republic” on 8 March 2011, which openly aimed to bring down the regime through a “peaceful escalation of protests” (ibid.: 18). This second coalition was co-founded by the “Youth of the 14 February Revolution,” while another group of young online activists, the “Bahrain 14 February Peaceful Movement,” adopted a more reformist stance. Still, the divisions in the opposition were not as clear-cut as

8 Participation in the strikes appears to have been impressively high according to the report by the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry: “While accurate statistics are not available, estimates have suggested that around 80-85% of employees in Bahrain went on strike on 20 February” (BICI 2011: 83).

9 These are al-Wefaq, al-Wa’ad, al-Minbar al-Taquadumi, al-Amal, al-Tajamua al-Qawmi, al-Tajamua al-Watani and al-Ikhaa; see ICG (2011a) report for short descriptions of these groups.

the classical reformist–radical dichotomy might have it. The “Bahrain 14 February Peaceful Movement,” for example, initiated and engaged in the highly provocative protests on 11 March, in which the seven legal opposition groups were unwilling to participate (see below). The affiliations at the grassroots level were probably more diffuse.

While the legal opposition spearheaded by al-Wefaq engaged in a semi-secret dialogue with the crown prince, the protest dynamics in the streets escalated. Thus, the situation was not simply that the more radical demands for regime change became more popular among the protesters, who also increasingly engaged in more provocative activities. Equally important, observers have noted, was the strongly biased, pro-regime coverage of the protests in all major newspapers (except for the independent Al-Wasat) and on Bahrain TV, and, furthermore, the lack of coverage on Al Jazeera Arabic, whose critical reporting had been very influential in Egypt and Tunisia. As a result, it was mostly foreign pro-Shiite news outlets (Hizbollah’s Al-Manar TV out of Lebanon, the Iranian Al-Alam Arabic news channel, Iraqi Shiite stations), which spotlighted the protests in Bahrain and gave voice to anti-regime activists (ICG 2011b: 6f.). This served as a pretext for the regime and its international supporters to further frame the movement as a pro-Iranian uprising, fueling lingering fears among Bahraini Sunnis. Within the context of this “media war” (ibid.), publicly voiced demands to bring down the regime only nurtured these fears, thus counteracting the initial attempts at cross-sectarian mobilization. As one close observer explains, “Many Sunnis initially sympathized with protesters’ demands for a constitutional monarchy, but they were at the same time worried that religious leaders would hijack the cause and set up a theocratic state if they came to power. The ruling family was seen as a barrier to such a threat. What ultimately turned many Sunnis against the protesters was their call for regime change” (Faramarzi 2011: 42).

Moreover, a counter-movement strongly hailed by the pro-regime media entered the scene on 18 February 2011. According to a Bahrain News Agency (BNA) report “Over 100,000 citizens took to Manama streets today after the Friday Prayers at Al Fateh Mosque and renewed their allegiance and loyalty to His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and his wise leadership [...]” (BNA, 18 February 2011). Two days later, the “National Unity Gathering” (NUG) was founded, which subsequently mobilized for the pro-regime mass protests in the square in front of Al Fateh Mosque. Although the numbers reported in the pro-regime media seem exaggerated (up to 350,000), the mobilization capacities of the NUG are remarkable, mostly because it includes, amongst others, three major preexisting Sunni Islamist groups with strong charity networks: the Bahraini Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafi Trend, and Jami’iyat al-Shura al-Islamiya. It is worth noting that the NUG “also includes some secular Sunni leftists who consider the Gathering a bulwark against Shiite Islamists and a defender of Bahrain’s ‘Arabness’” (ICG 2011b: 8). This can be read as an indication of the formation of a second and new Islamist-leftist coalition brought about by the upheavals. Especially members of the Salafi current within

this counter-movement, who generally despise Shiites on religious grounds as heretics, delivered inflammatory speeches that humiliated Shiites, accused the Bahraini government of not acting decisively enough against the protesters, and called on the Sunni community to take measures to defend itself against a Shiite takeover.¹⁰

Political tensions were obviously growing as minor instances of sectarian clashes started to be reported by the beginning of March, and overtly peaceful anti-regime demonstrations were sporadically attacked by armed, pro-regime thugs (baltajiya). Gengler (2012) states that “[l]arge pro-government rallies and campaigns of armed violence against Shi’i demonstrators aimed to slow the momentum of the uprising. By mid-March, there was a full-fledged counter-revolution that could have led to open sectarian clashes.”

Within this heated atmosphere, the unlicensed opposition groups al-Haq, al-Wafaa, and BIFM, together with the youth movements, organized a march toward the royal palace in al-Rifah outside Manama on 11 March. Even as the seven legal opposition groups refused to participate in the march—in order to avoid putting their reform-oriented dialogue with the crown prince at risk—this move was an unprecedented provocation to the regime, and it sparked fear. Anti-regime protesters finally crossed the red line when they attempted to block arterial streets with barricades and seal off the Bahrain Financial Harbour complex, a major economic center situated near the Pearl roundabout and home to the social development ministry, on 13 March. The situation turned violent when security forces clashed with protesters. Interviews conducted in May 2011 by staff of the International Crisis Group revealed that this was the “tipping point”: “Sunnis, government officials, as well as expatriate workers and diplomatic staff relate, they were frightened that Sunday that total anarchy would spread across the island with risk to their personal safety. In predominantly Sunni areas such as Muharraq, local vigilante groups formed and armed themselves, mainly with batons and swords but, according to some, also with guns [...] in order to defend neighbourhoods” (ICG 2011b: 2, 3). Bahrain subsequently invoked a GCC security agreement, on the basis of which troops from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and a small deployment from Qatar entered Bahrain on 14 March. On 15 March, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa announced a state of emergency, which entailed the prohibition of rallies. In the following days, both legal opposition groups and street activists suffered from a harsh crackdown, perceived by many as a campaign of retribution. Within three days, seven protesters were killed and many more injured by security forces and baltajiya armed with swords and clubs. Hundreds of people were arrested, including 21 opposition leaders (two were former MPs of al-Wefaq), political activists, and human rights defenders, who received long jail sentences in June 2011 (ICG 2011a: i, 2011b: 4ff.). Thus, the final stage of the first month of protest might be read as an example of how the escalation of protest can backfire when protesters misperceive their chances. What is

¹⁰ A striking example is provided by a speech given by former MP Mohammed Khalid, see: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DK8X47q-tlY&feature=player_embedded [retrieved 12.12.2012].

worse, they risked setting in motion the spirals of violence and related antagonistic group discourses that characterize armed inter-sectarian conflicts (Fearon/Laitin 2000).

The case of Bahrain is very instructive for further reflections on how the complex interactions between anti-regime and pro-regime forces affect the former's capacities for sustained mass mobilization. First, virtually the whole spectrum of repressive strategies was employed in Bahrain: censorship (of the Facebook page), co-optation attempts (money presents and dialogue with the licensed opposition groups), a seemingly orchestrated discursive attack (framing anti-regime protests as a foreign-instigated uprising in the state media), the emergence of a strong counter-movement that, though independent and not licensed, was backed by state officials and the media discourse, and finally, various forms of violence against the protesters perpetrated by both members of the state security services and non-state armed actors (baltajiya). While the violent repression in the initial stage had the effect of strengthening the anti-regime protests (backfire effect), later violent clashes between protesters and security services appear to have turned initial sympathies against the movement. One reason was, of course, the radicalization of the street protests themselves, which is another important lesson to be drawn from this episode of contention: the escalation of protest tactics can also backfire when it is based on a false estimation of potential consequences and chances of success. Furthermore, this radicalization deepened the rift between licensed and unlicensed opposition groups in the initial anti-regime coalition. In a similar vein, the regime's offer to the licensed groups to participate in a national dialogue can be read as another move to play on divergent aims and interests within the coalition of opposition groups. In addition, the vicious counter-framing in which state officials, commentators in the media, and Sunni Islamists (in particular Salafists) engaged more or less independently shows that physical violence per se cannot fully account for the observed effects on the mobilization capacities of the anti-regime coalition. Rather, physical violence and discursive attacks operate in two interrelated spheres. Taking into consideration the fact that various members of the regime, opposition groups, counter-movements, state media, security services, and the general public act simultaneously within these spheres, the trajectories of anti-regime mobilizations in autocracies appear to be more contingent than structuralist explanations might suggest.

4.3 Mobilization and repression in the 18 days of Tahrir

A comparison between the Egyptian dynamics of mass mobilization and repression with the case of Bahrain reveals some similarities. Most notable are the number of opposition groups mobilizing for protests on 25 January 2011, and backfire effects produced by regime–dissident interactions in the physical and discursive sphere.

Like in Bahrain, mobilization efforts surfaced with calls on Facebook pages, in particular the page of the April 6 Youth Movement and a page called “We are all

Khalid Said.” The latter was created shortly after a young blogger, Khalid Mohamed Said, was dragged out of an internet café and killed by two security agents in Alexandria in June 2010. By January 2011, the Facebook group “We are all Khalid Said” had about 400,000 members. Thus, the issue of police violence and repression was a major mobilizing factor, which again related to the choice of the date: the National Police Day holiday on 25 January. Apart from demands raised in previous protests, i.e., a fair minimum wage, ending the emergency law, and a two-term limit on the presidency, the major issue was a call for the resignation of then interior minister Habib al-Adli. This happened against the backdrop of a violent attack on Copts on New Year’s Day, which left 23 people dead and 97 injured. Subsequent protests by Copts also blamed al-Adli and the security forces (ICG 2011c: 2). In the run-up to 25 January, a broad coalition materialized that was, of course, a product of older processes of coalition formation and coalition breakdown (Sowers/Toensing 2012).

Between 2000 and 2010, Egypt had witnessed several waves of organized mass protests with thousands of participants. The marches in solidarity with the Palestinian intifada in 2000 and 2002, the protests against the 2003 Iraq War, the protests staged from 2005 to 2006 by the Kefaya (Enough) movement, and an increase of organized labor activism since 2006 are telling of a vibrant movement environment in place (Soudias 2014; Vairel/Beinin 2011; Korany/El Mahdi 2012; El Mahdi 2009). And even though Bahraini activists have a long history of protest in their country, too, no comparably strong precursors to the non-sectarian coalition could be built in early 2011. This constitutes an important difference from the Egyptian case, where sharp ideological divisions were repeatedly overcome over the course of the decade. Most notable are the increasing instances of pragmatic cooperation between Leftists and Islamists after 20 years of deep-seated mutual antagonism (Abdelrahman 2009). Another crucial development was the formation of the April 6 Youth Movement in 2008, mostly by young and educated middle-class activists who declared their support for the striking textile workers of Mahalla al-Kubra, thus building a bridge between the emerging independent labor movement and the urban youth. Yet, observers stated that by the end of 2010, mobilization for political protest was generally low, despite widespread frustration fuelled once more by the rigged parliamentary elections that took place in November (ICG 2011c: 1, Korany/El Mahdi 2012).

Building on these previous experiences, by 24 January 2011 the Revolutionary Youth Coalition had formed and held their first official meeting (Al-Masri al-Youm, 7 July 2012), which included representatives from the Youth Movement for Justice and Freedom, the April 6 Youth Movement, the campaign to support Mohamed El-Baradei, the National Association for Change, the youth wings of the Democratic Front, al-Karama, Tagammu’ and al-Ghad parties, as well as independent activists (Carnegie undated). Also worth noting is the participation of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, Egypt’s largest organized opposition group, which had announced just a week before that it did not support the planned protests on 25 January (Ikhwanweb, 23 January 2011). However, by 24 January, the Brotherhood

declared that although it did not plan to mobilize its supporters, it would back the protests symbolically (The Guardian, 24 January 2011; Al-Masri al-Youm, 24 January 2011a), and individual leaders and youth members announced that they would participate in the protests (Al-Masri al-Youm, 24 January 2011b, c). A tacit cooperation between Islamists and secular and leftist forces had again materialized. In addition, previously nonpolitical forces openly supported the calls for protest: ultras of the two major —and antagonistic— Cairene football clubs, al-Ahly and Zamalek (Al-Masri al-Youm, 24 January 2011c), who came to play a decisive role in physically defending Tahrir square (Tadros 2011, El-Ghobashy 2011). Furthermore, demonstrations by workers, farmers, students, and taxi drivers calling for better working conditions, higher wages, and social justice already took place in twelve towns on 24 January (Al-Masri al-Youm, 25 January 2011).

Similar to Bahrain, the mobilization activities were challenged from the start by various forms of repression, both physical and discursive. Efforts by regime agents to quell mobilization prior to 25 January included arrests of activists (Al-Masri al-Youm, 21 January 2011), painting over activist graffiti (April 6 Youth Movement, 21 January 2011), and more importantly, various threats, such as official announcements that the “security apparatus will deal firmly and decisively” with unlicensed demonstrations (Reuters, 24 January 2011) or letters demanding that companies fire employees who take part in the protests (EgyTimes Blog, 24 January 2011). Also, members of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) warned shopkeepers of riots that might break out (Al-Masri al-Youm, 24 January 2011a), and denounced the planned protests as being aimed at causing chaos and destabilizing the country (Al-Masri al-Youm, 25 January 2011a). This is a securitizing frame, which was also used in Bahrain and probably belongs to the repertoire of (discursive) repression of many regimes around the globe.

Likewise, some pro-regime groups tried to counter the mobilization. For example, a coalition of seven parties calling itself the “Local Front for the Defense of the Egyptian People” announced their dismissal of the protests (Al-Masri al-Youm, 24 January 2011c). Reportedly, pro-regime forces also staged a demonstration celebrating the police (Al-Masri al-Youm, 24 January 2011d). Finally, a statement issued on 23 January by the priest of Cairo's Virgin Mary Church, calling on “all Coptic youths” to refrain from participating in the protests, can be regarded as indicative of Coptic anxieties, all too comprehensible in light of the attack on New Year's Day (Al-Masri al-Youm, 23 January 2011). But the fact that Copts later participated strongly, becoming highly visible when they shielded praying Muslims at Tahrir Square from attacks by pro-regime *baltagija*, suggests that mobilization was effective in overcoming sectarian tensions.

The turnout of mobilization efforts was higher than expected: “The result was unprecedented: for the first time in most protesters' memory, they outnumbered police” (ICG 2011c: 3). This was probably the impulse necessary to initiate the campaign of sustained mass mobilization that eventually made Hosni Mubarak step down. However, as in the case of Bahrain, increasing mobilization and more radical

demands for regime change—along with the determination to achieve this—can be attributed, in large part, to backfire effects. Two more examples of backfire effects in Egypt illustrate the importance of closely studying the dynamic interaction between anti-regime and pro-regime forces in the physical and discursive spheres.

In an effort to undermine the mobilization for a fourth day in a row, i.e. on 28 January, dubbed by mobilizing activists the “Friday of Rage,” the regime shut down cell phone and internet networks across the country in the early morning (Hassanpour 2011). Contrary to the intentions of the regime, this move sparked even more demonstrations across the country, which the police forces were unable to control, and which eventually led the regime to deploy military units in order to regain control. Hassanpour (2011: 28) provides convincing arguments for this phenomenon. First, people who had abstained from participation until that point due to lack of interest, apolitical attitudes, or unawareness, were disrupted by the shut-down and thus dragged into the ongoing confrontation. Second, the disconnection forced supporters of the protests—and those who worried about their safety—to communicate face-to-face in the streets. And third, protesters were highly innovative and spontaneously applied “new hybrid communication tactics” that escaped the police’s means of control.

A second crucial day was 2 February. From the evening of 28 January on, clashes between pro-regime protesters, who by then were also mobilizing support more effectively, and anti-regime protesters became more frequent, adding fuel to an already violent conflict with security services. Although the April 6 movement declared that the number of participants in the demonstrations on 1 February had reached a million (“Millyoneya”) (April 6 Youth Movement blog, 8 February 2011), the general atmosphere was about to turn against the protests, due to fears sparked by growing violence and increasing exhaustion. And, like in Bahrain, the regime increasingly engaged in a vicious media campaign that framed the protests as being instigated by foreign powers. When Mubarak stated the same evening that he would finally step down by the end of his term (September 2011), he was offering a compromise solution to the crisis that many people were probably willing to support (ICG 2011c: 8). However, the violent attack on protesters in Tahrir Square staged by pro-regime baltagija under the eyes of a passive military on 2 February strengthened the determination and unwillingness to compromise of those who defended the square. From that day forward, their primary demand was that president Mubarak step down immediately. The number of protesters increased again on 4 February, after the military had announced that it would not try to clear the square by force and prevent further violent clashes between pro- and anti-Mubarak demonstrators. From the perspective of the anti-Mubarak protesters, the vicious attack on 2 February was the straw that broke the camel’s back. As such, it constitutes a classic example of a backfire effect.

As stated before, it is crucial to consider the discursive dimension as well, in order to fully grasp the mobilization–repression dynamics at play and the (backfire) effects they produce. The slogans articulated at the second “Millyoneya” on 4 Febru-

ary and the subsequent mass demonstrations called more than ever for the downfall of the regime, or rather the ousting of the “Pharaoh.” Many of the slogans expressed a sense of patriotism (“Raise your head, for you are Egyptian”), which was visually enhanced by the waving of Egyptian flags and invoked the unity of the people that suffered at the hands of a corrupt regime. As one sign made out of cardboard pointedly phrased it before the first large demonstration: “One people, one plight” (El Zein/Ortiz 2011: 2). This can be read as a simple but conscious attempt to reach out to all segments of society and thus strengthen and enhance the broad coalition on a discursive level. Other popular slogans that drew on more politically laden terms still used neutral, universalistic language such as “Dignity, Freedom, Social Justice” (Beinin 2011: 25) that left enough room for interpretation to not exclude preexisting opposition groups. As Kenney (2001) argues in the case of the Freedom and Peace movement, which effectively challenged the Communist regime in Poland at the end of the 1980s, framing can also be quite effective in turning violent repression against the regime by scandalizing it. This applies especially to the case of Egypt where, as Salwa Ismail (2011: 990) astutely argues, the articulated frames resonated with the “intersubjective understandings of individual experiences of humiliation in interaction with agents and agencies of government.” Such widely shared feelings are a major (individual) driving force facilitating mass mobilization when they are addressed and pointedly expressed by the slogans articulated in public. In this way, protesters can turn severe physical attacks, i.e., violent forms of repression, as well as individually experienced but commonplace acts of humiliation, against the regime. More generally, the effective framing of repression and critical issues—such as high unemployment, food shortages, and the corruption of state officials—in a way that resonates with prevalent perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not, severely casts doubt upon a regime’s legitimacy.

As in the Bahraini case, the Mubarak regime also constructed powerful narratives in an effort to counter the mobilization frames of its challengers. Examples included denouncing protesters as thugs, sparking fears of insecurity, or announcing reforms. This discursive repression was publicized via semi-public, state-owned media outlets, i.e. national TV channels, radio stations, and major newspapers. It remained an important factor in Egypt, despite the fact that new media challenged the regime’s monopolistic control of information flow. In particular when violent confrontations in the streets increasingly escalated, popular sentiment came close to turning against the anti-regime protests. But in contrast to Bahrain, the anti-regime coalition was more unified, and thus more persistent. This can definitely be attributed to the consensus among challengers regarding the core objectives of the anti-regime coalition. That the slogans were not phrased in radical leftist or Islamist terms probably defused, to a certain extent, existing anxieties and suspicions, and thereby facilitated a broader mobilization against the reign of Hosni Mubarak. In any case, the idea of witnessing the downfall of the regime did not scare away broader segments of society after 4 February 2011, thus paving the road from revolutionary situation to a revolutionary outcome, which stands in stark contrast to the bloody repression and renewed depth of sectarian splits in Bahrain.

5. Conclusion

This article began with the puzzle of how the 2011 mass mobilizations in Egypt, Bahrain, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen could happen, and how they could be sustained in some cases but not in others. Based on a certain uneasiness with structuralist and contemporary explanations of the 2011 upheavals in the MENA region, we proposed focusing on the agency of actor coalitions, framing activities, and various forms of repression for a preliminary analysis of how regime–opposition interactions affect the persistence and achievements of anti-regime coalitions. As the literature on social revolutions and nonviolent resistance suggests, such broad coalitions are necessary to mount serious challenges to entrenched authoritarian regimes. But so far, the rapidly growing body of research literature on the Arab upheavals appears to have neglected broad coalitions comprised of previously isolated, competing, or even antagonistic opponents of the regime. By adding the concept of framing and a broad understanding of repression, this article proposes an original research perspective to study the trajectories of campaigns of anti-regime protests. The case discussions have substantiated that the interactions between pro-regime and anti-regime forces operate in two interrelated spheres: first, on the level of direct interaction between protesters and regime agents or pro-regime groups in the physical sphere of public locations; and second, in the discursive sphere of meaning construction, where struggles for the legitimacy of political causes take place. The concept of framing provides an adequate tool to study the discursive struggles between anti-regime and pro-regime forces. The application of this approach to the two very different cases of Bahrain and Egypt has revealed that violent or disruptive forms of repression, as well as the escalation of protests, can backfire: Repression can spark an increase in support for anti-regime protests, and thus broaden or strengthen anti-regime coalitions.

Outrageous acts of violence by actors affiliated with the regime, in particular state security agents, are highly likely to backfire on a regime. Bahrain is a case in point where the unexpectedly harsh crackdown during the first four days fuelled further mobilization by protesters. Incredible acts of state violence also sparked and fuelled the initial protests in Syria. In late February 2011, some 15 school children were arrested — and tortured — in the southern city of Daraa for painting anti-government graffiti. Local security forces humiliated the parents who demanded the release of their children, and finally opened fire on protesters for the first time on 18 March. When president Assad framed the protests on 30 March in the governorate of Daraa as being staged by conspirators against his regime, even supporters of the regime were appalled (Sterling 2012). This last aspect indicates again that the frames constructed with reference to physical interactions are necessary to fully grasp the trajectories of protest campaigns. In the case of Syria, not only the particular acts of physical violence, but also the frame constructed by the president himself to legitimize that violence backfired. It is the meanings attached to shocking violence that motivate people to act more decisively and overcome the “wall of fear.” Nothing

indicates this more clearly than the Tunisian reaction to the desperate act of self-immolation by Mohammad Bouazizi, an individual act that was broadly understood as resultant from — and thus came to symbolize — the humiliating injustice of the Tunisian regime. These examples corroborate the constructionist argument that violence acts as a “summary symbol” that intensifies meaning (Cremer-Schäfer 1992: 24), the effects of which are highly dependent upon the meanings attached to the respective actions within a particular context. But apart from that, meanings also appear to be attached to nonviolent but brazen acts of repression. The Mubarak regime’s small experiment in state censorship, i.e., the shutdown of information technologies, demonstrates this well.

At the same time, for similar reasons, the exercise of more provocative forms of protest is a risky endeavor, for it can split unstable anti-regime coalitions and cost them popular sympathy. This could be observed in both cases studied in this article. Here, too, we suggest that the discursive struggles for legitimacy, which are closely linked to physical interactions, are key to understanding how broad-based mass movements form in authoritarian contexts, how they manage to mount a challenge to an entrenched regime, and why they persist or crumble in the face of repression. In this respect, it is important not to restrict our focus to the ways in which protesters try to gain legitimacy for their causes and at the same time work to undermine the legitimacy of the incumbent regime. The discursive counter-attacks by the respective regimes, rather than just the means and types of force applied, need to be studied in more depth as well. None of the authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, not even the Syrian one, is built on violence alone. As the sources of legitimacy vary across cases, regimes have different capacities to develop more or less resonant frames. For example, one case of authoritarian rule that is strongly based on traditional, religious, and political sources of legitimacy is the Moroccan monarchy. Consequently, the 20 February Movement in Morocco has made strong efforts to deconstruct the official royal discourse, and probably the most important part of the struggle between anti-regime and pro-regime forces has taken place in the discursive sphere (Hoffman/König 2013).

A shared feature of all Arab regimes’ public discourses has been the stigmatization of protesters as “foreign agents,” as well as the invocation of insecurity, chaos, and national destabilization. Such discursive acts of repression often aim to deepen latent or manifest divisions between opposition groups or the general public. An especially perfidious type of this divide-and-rule strategy is the invocation of particular identity groups and the concomitant incitement of fears of being victimized by other identity groups, should the latter succeed in toppling the regime. Constructivist and rationalist approaches in peace and conflict studies highlight the fact that antagonistic in- and out-groups are socially constructed, and in many cases such construction work is performed by elites for strategic reasons (Fearon/Laitin 2000; Oberschall 2000). In a similar vein, notions of security threats follow similar logics of discursive construction, and the “securitization” of an issue commonly provides a pretext to use extraordinary means, such as resorting to state capacities

to use force, in order to counter alleged threats (Williams 2003; Amar forthcoming). Framing by regime members can serve both to incite fear or divisions among different communities and to securitize public protest. Both strategies also aim to delegitimize anti-regime protests. As this article has shown, Bahrain is one case where the fatal dynamics of inter-sectarian strife can be set in motion easily. In contrast, the Mubarak regime ultimately failed in its national security discourse, although the majority of the population did not participate in the protests, and many lived through 18 days of anxiety and real or perceived security threats. As argued in the Egyptian case study, many people would have probably accepted Mubarak's offer to step down by the end of his term in September 2011. But the violent attack on protesters in Tahrir Square unleashed just one day after his speech made the offer meaningless.

The backfire effects and interaction dynamics discussed in this article are well known, and they appear to follow a more general logic, which — though in less detail — has also been grasped within the analytical framework of “Dynamics of Contention.” In their discussion of the successful 1979 Nicaraguan revolution and the failed 1989 student uprising in China, McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001: chap. 7) suggest that both regime crackdowns (in Nicaragua) and the radicalization of a certain share of protesters (in Tiananmen Square) can be regarded as mechanisms that, in conjunction with other mechanisms, shape subsequent developments. However, contrary to the even broader and rather elite-oriented perspective of McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly, we opted for a more focused analysis of how anti-regime coalitions operate in highly repressive contexts. Not surprisingly, a comparison of the two cases in Bahrain and Egypt indicates that consensus regarding the common objectives of the struggle is a major asset to anti-regime coalitions challenged by various forms of repression. Still, this is not a sufficient explanation for the different outcomes. The particular strategies and tactics, both violent and nonviolent, of repression against challengers of power must be studied in more depth as well.

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