

**From Tahrir Square to Tiananmen:  
Why the Egyptians succeeded in 2011 but the Chinese failed in 1989?**

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As Henry Giroux points out, “politics is the performative register of moral action.” It prevents justice and compassion from being extinguished among us.<sup>1</sup> Ceremonial rituals and rhetorical performance in politics constitute an integral part of state-society relations today. This is particularly true for the “Jasmine Revolutions” that have spread eastward from Tunisia to Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria, and then doubled back to Libya. These revolutionary upheavals mark the beginning of a new era in the early twenty-first century. Young people have stood up for themselves and organized spontaneous popular uprisings against the decade-long authoritarian regimes that obstructed their upward mobility and deprived them of civil, political, and subsistence rights. After the quick victory of the Tunisian revolution, the Egyptians succeeded in using the electronic and social media to break down the state’s surveillance machine and topple President Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled the country from 1981 to 2011. The new media interacted with the oral and printed forms of news transmission, and therefore created an extensive chain of political news diffusion through which the Egyptians understood and interpreted the evolving turbulent events and organized massive protests based on the information they believed to be reliable. History shows that the authoritarian regime that rules by fear also rules in fear. Even though the Mubarak regime arrested Wael Ghonim, the Google executive in Egypt, for creating a popular Facebook group to start the demonstration and demonized the protesters as instigated by hostile foreign forces, such measures only reflected the growing paranoia of the government. Once the Egyptians acquired their own source of information outside the official media, this became a bad omen for the regime. When the state completely lost control of the escalating situation, the public were ready to step in and take over in the name of liberty.

The excitement of the Egyptian uprising reminded me of the prodemocracy movement in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, in the spring of 1989, almost twenty-two years ago. Like the Egyptian revolution, the Tiananmen prodemocracy movement began with Chinese students’ protests against the rampant and blatant corruption and the impurity for those government officials involved. Then, the students launched the hunger strike and occupied the Tiananmen Square at center of Beijing, urging the public to join them in

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forceful and inspirational language and calling for democratic transformation of the one-party state. Even though these spectacular demonstrations had numerous similarities, electronic communication technology was the major decisive difference between Egypt today and China in 1989.

## **1. Acting on information**

The Tiananmen protesters were outraged by government failures to deal with widespread corruption and stagnant economy. They worried that the country risked sinking into hopelessness unless the Communist rulers undertook swift political reforms. After the sudden death of reformist party leader Hu Yaobang on April 15, 1989, Chinese students seized the opportunity to express their political and economic grievances. They captured and subverted the official commemoration of Hu Yaobang and turned it into an essentially expansive and participatory moment of struggle. They not only revived the old symbol of revolutionary heroism and a sense of ultimate justice, but also shored up the nerve of other protesters fighting against any obstacles that had imperiled themselves and the progress of the country. Their ability to mobilize themselves into autonomous student bodies, to ally with workers and citizens, and to organize citywide protests set a fine example of political activism at the grassroots level.

In the Arab Revolution of 2011, the internet, facebook and twitter propelled the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. The tech-savvy Egyptian youths formed the backbone of anti-Mubarak protests in the early days. They politicized the public and inspired the rest of the population to get involved. Thanks to the diffusion of electronic media, the political message of revolutionary change has now become easily accessible across the Arab world.

## **2. Claiming the political space**

In early May 1989, the Chinese students took the protest to a new height by staging a hunger strike in Tiananmen Square. The hunger strikers sought to awaken fellow citizens while shaming the Communist authorities through their selfless sacrifice. As they announced heroically in the Hunger Strike Declaration on May 12,

Compatriots and all fellow countrymen with a conscience, at this critical moment of life and death of our people, please listen to our voice:

This country is our country,

The people are our people.

The government is our government,

Who will shout if we don't?

Who will act if we don't?

The strikers declared themselves to be sovereign citizens, exercising their rights to critique the authoritarian regime. They continued: "Death is definitely not our pursuit. But if the death of a single person or a number of persons would enable a larger number of people to live better, or if the death can make our homeland stronger and more prosperous, then we have no right to drag on an ignorable existence."<sup>2</sup> By risking their lives for the country, the

students were reborn as new revolutionary heroes against the power-obsessed Communist rulers who were keen to retain their control, rather than having dialogue with the protesters. Faced with the officials' indifference to their sufferings and their demands for democratic reforms, the students seized the moral ground and captured much public sympathy. The rulers' corruption shocked the whole world, but the students' sacrifices inspired the people to follow them. The students occupied the Tiananmen Square for weeks and turned it to be a gigantic political theatre, winning nationwide support and international media attention. In Beijing alone, workers, teachers, professionals and ordinary people joined in the unprecedented protests weeks after weeks. Meanwhile, the people ridiculed their rulers and challenged the Communist Party's claim to power. Prominent intellectual Yan Jiaqi called Deng Xiaoping "an emperor without a formal title."<sup>3</sup> Many Chinese scornfully mocked their paramount leader in public and gained a sense of self-empowerment. Such grassroots mobilization took place outside the state's control. This enabled the public to legitimize their activism and to shape the symbolic meaning of the occupied political space.

In a similar fashion, the Egyptians playfully expressed their frustrations with the Mubarak regime in a wide range of dialects and languages. The poems, songs, and slogans of Tahrir Square completely rejected the ideological program and official worldview propagated by the regime. They ridiculed President Mubarak as "the Pharaoh."<sup>4</sup> The internet-savvy middle-class youths carried creative signs with slogans such as "Mubarak is offline," "Mubarak fail" and "Delete Mubarak."<sup>5</sup> While the youths skillfully mastered an electronic medium that their rulers had failed to comprehend, the critical intellectuals and protesters succeeded in countering the regime's top-down ideology and creating "a defiantly popular egalitarianism and confrontational culture of their own."<sup>6</sup> As Ahmed Fouad Negm chanted a moving poem in Tahrir Square,

Who are they, and who are we?  
They are the authority, the sultans.  
They are the rich, and the government is on their side.  
We are the poor, the governed.  
Think about it, use your head.  
See which one of us rules the other.<sup>7</sup>

Evidently, a strong sense of moral clarity emerged among the Egyptians as they no longer feared that an Islamic theocracy would replace a secular tyranny, as had happened in Iran in 1976.<sup>8</sup> The protesters clearly drew a line between the corrupt rulers and the oppressed, and they were determined to be emancipated from the tyranny, taking control of their destiny and making their own new world.

### **3. Staging political drama**

In the spring of 1989, the Tiananmen students transformed their scattered protests against corruption and injustice into a massive democratic struggle that directly opposed the mighty Communist state. They relied on a repertoire of goals, tactics, slogans, charismatic leaders, scripts and rituals to achieve mass mobilizations and public protests. This accomplishment alone made an impressive political spectacle.

The same scale of political spectacle can be seen in the Jasmine Revolutions. For example, throughout the eighteen days from January 25 to February 11, 2011, Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo became a people's square, the epicenter of anti-Mubarak protests that shaped the world. Egypt's idealistic, youthful, and resourceful demonstrators have won the first major battle in their democratic struggle. The next step is to draw on such a powerful energy released from Tahrir Square to create its own leadership and envision the new agendas and priorities for Egypt's transition to democracy.<sup>9</sup> Although events elsewhere show that the process of democratization is difficult and often frustrating for anyone who wants to have immediate results and early victories, the Egyptians are now a liberated people, free to express their views, to engage in public discourse and to choose their futures.

#### **4. Mobilizing online**

The Tiananmen protesters did everything right in grassroots mobilization, but they failed to outdo the state at the level of information and communication technologies. Information control has turned out to be far more important than military control in China. As Joseph Goebbels, the propaganda minister of Hitler, once said, "Tell a lie a hundred times and it becomes the truth." The Chinese authorities Goebbels' advice seriously and never let go the control of state-run televisions, cable news, printed media, mobile phone networks and internet. They have responded to the political challenges of the electronic and social media with the harsh measures of establishing the world's large internet police, restricting internet access, filtering online contents, and monitoring online discussions and web behaviors.<sup>10</sup>

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the widespread use of electronic and social media has vastly expanded the flow of information and the range of communication by opening up access to various sources. The world was outraged when watching online videos of Mubarak's supporters attacking peaceful protesters in Tahrir Square. People outside Cairo could easily access satellite news and information on the internet that was not broadcast on state-run television. With the advent of internet, facebook and twitter and the popular use of cell phones, the new media empowered the communication power of ordinary people and equalized their relations with the state. As a result, the Mubarak regime no longer monopolized the news outlet for information and sources. Increased access to the independent source of information enabled people to decipher the lies that had permeated every level of society and to turn against the propaganda being given to them. The significance of the Jasmine Revolutions lies in the fact that there has emerged a transnational moment of heightened awareness of political upheavals in various countries from North Africa to the Middle East. In the early days, the Egyptian activists constantly communicated with the Tunisians online. The new media gave rise to an invisible electronic highway that transcended national boundaries and allowed the activists to exchange information, gather ideas for countering riot police, formulate mobilizing tactics, and discuss new political visions online. Therefore, the participants in the Jasmine Revolutions had greater resources for mass communication at their disposal than did the Chinese students in 1989.

## Conclusion

John Major stated when he resigned as British Prime Minister on May 2, 1997: “When the curtain falls, it is time to get off the stage.” However, both Deng Xiaoping in spring 1989 and Hosni Mubarak in early February 2011 refused to step down in the midst of massive protests. The final outcome of these popular uprisings is sometimes beyond the control of the protesters. In China, the military crackdown on the prodemocracy movement crushed the peaceful uprising in Tiananmen Square and the protesters’ dreams for democracy. In Egypt, the absence of the military intervention guaranteed the success of the protests and the smooth transition to democracy.

Nevertheless, both movements had lived up to the old Maoist revolutionary spirit of “The Chinese people stands up” and the contemporary Obama idealism of “Yes we can.” From the start, both events were bottom-up revolutions, which had developed from anti-government demonstrations organized by the youths to unprecedented people’s uprisings. They were not campaigns initiated by some ambitious politicians and fundamentalist clerics in their attempts to seize power from above. Now, the new message of revolutionary change has made its way to China and has inspired the internet youth. The “Jasmine Revolution” may not replicate itself in China unless an economic crisis forces ordinary people to take to the streets. However, many Chinese activists believe that it is now time for direct action. On February 20, 2011, political dissidents and human rights fighters organized simultaneous protests in thirteen cities across China and called for a “Chinese Jasmine Revolution” modeled on the popular uprisings sweeping through North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> On February 27, the protests spread to over twenty cities.<sup>12</sup> The recent arrest of Ai Weiwei, a prominent artist known for his criticism of the Chinese government, and the official crackdown on journalists, community activists, workers and unofficial churches reveal the proliferation of dissident movements throughout the society.<sup>13</sup> All the oppressive measures completely fail to keep the dissidents in check. The dissidents have deliberately challenged the state’s control over the electronic media and have pursued what Robert P. Weller calls a new and “alternate civility,” which will foster dramatic political change and defend the civil society against complete incorporation by a powerful state.<sup>14</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Henry Giroux, “Vocationalizing Higher Education: Schooling and the Politics of Corporate Culture,” *College Literature* 26, no.3 (Fall 1999):147-161.

<sup>2</sup> “Hunger Strikers’ Announcement,” May 12, 1989, in Padraic Kenney, *1989 Democratic Revolutions at the Cold War’s End: A Brief History with Documents* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2010), 169-172.

<sup>3</sup> Yan Jiaqi, “China is Hardly a Republic,” *World Affairs* 152, no.3 (Winter 1989-1990): 163-166.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolai Grozni, “The Ghost of Revolutions Past,” *The New York Times* (February 13, 2011), The Week in Review, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Zimmer, “How the War of Words was Won,” *The New York Times* (February 13, 2011), The Week in Review, 4.

<sup>6</sup> Robyn Creswell, “Egypt: The Cultural Revolution,” *The New York Times Book Review* (February 20, 2011), 27.

<sup>7</sup> Robyn Creswell, “Egypt: The Cultural Revolution,” *The New York Times Book Review* (February 20, 2011), 27.

- <sup>8</sup> Fouad Ajami, "How the Arabs turned Shame into Liberty," *The New York Times* (February 27, 2011), The Week in Review, 10.
- <sup>9</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, "They did it," *The New York Times* (February 13, 2011), The Week in Review, 8; Ryan Lizza, "The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring remade Obama's foreign policy," *The New Yorker* (May 2, 2011), 44-55.
- <sup>10</sup> Johan Lagerkvist, *After the Internet, Before Democracy: Competing Norms in Chinese Media and Society* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2010).
- <sup>11</sup> Anita Chang, "China Tries to Stamp Out 'Jasmine Revolution'," The Associated Press (February 20, 2011), retrieved on February 21, 2011 from [http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/A/AS\\_CHINA\\_JASMINE\\_REVOLUTION?SITE=MOSPL&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT](http://hosted.ap.org/dynamic/stories/A/AS_CHINA_JASMINE_REVOLUTION?SITE=MOSPL&SECTION=HOME&TEMPLATE=DEFAULT); Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Security Officials Respond to Call for Protests," *The New York Times* (February 20, 2011), retrieved on February 21, 2011 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/21/world/asia/21china.html>.
- <sup>12</sup> Ian Johnson, "Protests in China Draw Few Demonstrators But Many Police," *The New York Times* (February 28, 2011), A10.
- <sup>13</sup> Sharon LaFraniere and Edward Wong, "Even with Protests Averted, China Turns to Intimidation of Foreign Journalists," *The New York Times* (March 17, 2011), A4 and A9; "Repression and the New Ruling Class: China's Crackdown," and "China's New Rulers: Princelings and the Goon State," *The Economist* (April 16, 2011), 12 and 43-44; Andrew Jacobs, "Illicit Church, Evicted, Tries to Buck Beijing," *The New York Times* (April 18, 2011), A4 and A9; Andrew Jacobs, "Chinese Christians Detained after Attempt at Easter Rites," *The New York Times* (April 25, 2011), A6; David Barboza, "Truck Drivers in Shanghai Plan to Resume Protests," *The New York Times* (April 25, 2011), A6.
- <sup>14</sup> Robert P. Weller, *Alternate civilities: Democracy and culture in China and Taiwan* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2001).