

A Reflection on Violence and Democracy

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by [Koenraad Bogaert](#)

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On the morning of 30 June, BBC reporter Aleem Maqbool reports from Cairo, “what is today going to be remembered for? What is the 30th June going to be remembered for? Is it going to be the turning point in Egyptian politics or is it going to be remembered for violence?” But what if violence constitutes an integral, even inevitable, component of a democratic struggle? Considering the radical political transformations of the Arab world in the past two years, we cannot help but notice that, from the outset, they were attended by varying degrees of violence. In the case of Egypt, for instance, where non-violence was figuratively symbolic of the 2011 revolution, such a varnished perspective does not go without challenge. Philip Rizk **pointed out** that “despite the glorification of an eighteen-day revolution as non-violent, violence has been a part of this revolution since the first stone was thrown on 25 January 2011—followed three days later by the torching of police stations on the Friday of Rage—and until today.”



[Buses burn following clashes between supporters and opponents of the Muslim Brotherhood from 23 March 2013. Photo by Khalil Hamra/AP]

Before delving into the logic of this argument, let me emphasize that it is not my intention to legitimize—much less glorify—some vague abstraction of revolutionary violence. Nor do I want to dismiss the meaningful public commitment to non-violence made by all significant parties to the action in the run-up to the 30 June “rebel campaign.” Yet, as history shows, non-violent political action often only becomes effective when it provokes violence, when it obliges the powerful to expose the violence that underlies the maintenance of a given political order. Indeed, one might say that the very point of non-violent political action is to make this violence explicit, to make it part of the democratic struggle by bringing people face to face with what they are really up against. One must not forget that half a million people died in the course of Ghandi’s non-violent struggle for independence against British colonialism. Today, from Tahrir to Taksim and around the world, the occupiers of public space have exposed the violent structures that order their societies precisely by refusing to leave without a struggle.[1] As such, the provoked violence can expose a salient **hypocrisy** within certain contemporary democratic discourses: you may protest as loud as possible and contest whatever you want, as long as your words remain ineffective and nothing really changes.[2]

So, can violence be of importance within radical democratic processes or revolutions? The abundant critical literature on the history of revolutions would suggest that it is. Hannah Arendt, for example, argued that a revolution is inconceivable outside the domain of violence. For that reason, she argues, there is a thin line between revolution and war.[3] Because Arendt conceived of revolutions as a struggle for political freedom—rather than merely liberation from oppression—they are accompanied by an urgent call to construct a new form of government.[4] It is through revolution that the democratic republic comes to replace the absolutist monarchy. As such, the critical question raised in relation to violence in a revolutionary context is not necessarily whether it is desirable or even necessary – in my opinion it is never desirable, and its necessity can never fully be demonstrated – but rather whether it has made a real contribution to radical change and political freedom. As Barrington Moore reminds us, “Western democracy has behind it a very violent history.”[5] In other words, violence has contributed greatly to the history of Western political society and the political freedom of the oppressed peoples of Europe and the United States.

Yet, recent (Western) scholarship seems to neglect—even deny sometimes—this violent history when it comes to analyzing the revolutionary struggles in the Arab region. In contemporary debates on this matter, violence and democracy are all too often conceptualized as separate, even antithetical. If violence is mentioned in the context of democracy, democratization, or more broadly, a struggle for political freedom, it is mostly **presented as a threat**.[6]

One reason for this may be the generalization of a particular history in the academic literature on democracy and transition. By this, I am referring to the privileged place held by the history of non-violent revolutions throughout the former Soviet bloc and the subsequent transitions to liberal democracy in Central Europe. Together, these events became a powerful reference, an ideal imaginary even, for the neoliberal conceptualization of democratic struggle. In

this way, there was a ready-made “**world historical narrative**” by which Western elites could interpret the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world. It was not just academics, but also policymakers, who sought to recast the uprisings in the image of central Europe. The G8 summit in 2011 opened with a declaration on the Arab uprisings that explicitly framed events in the Arab world in exactly this way, stating that “changes under way in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are historic and have the potential to open the door to the kind of transformation that occurred in **Central and Eastern Europe** after the fall of the Berlin Wall.”

This is part of a wider shift in conceptualizing political change. As Asef Bayat noted, since the end of the Cold War, the dominant liberal narratives on political and social change, especially on the Middle East, were informed by the idioms of the new era: civil society, accountability, non-violence, and gradualism.[7] In this way, the category of (violent) revolution, once relevant—and in some circles *primary*—to the analysis of social change, fell into disuse, replaced by gradualist, discursive and process-oriented models.

The relevant date, for theorists of democracy and social change, was 1989, not 1776, 1789 or 1917. This was the intellectual and policy context in which revolution in the Arab world was first received. It is not surprising that certain aspects of the Arab uprisings—such as the peaceful, creative tactics of Tahrir Square—would be foregrounded, while others—such as the attacks on police stations and the killing of several police officers in Suez—would not. Stories about networked activism, civil organizations, and public deliberative processes found a more welcome reception. Critical thinkers went along with this dominant narrative to a certain extent, decoupling revolution from violence. As Mahmood Mamdani would argue, Tahrir Square, “shed a generation’s romance with violence. The generation of Nasser and after had embraced violence as key to fundamental political and social change”. [8] In this way, Tahrir Square was said to innovate a new politics, and an alternative mode of struggle that turned away from violence, missing the point that maybe Tahrir only became effective through its provocation of violence or, at least, through the way it fed the speculations of a looming all-out violent outburst.

This idea that violence is antithetical to democratic struggle is not just seductive, in some quarters it is also dogmatic. In this regard, we might consider the **following remarks** by Marina Ottaway, senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center: “In the early days of the Egyptian uprising, when violence threatened to engulf the country, the military did an admirable job of maintaining order without violence and easing Hosni Mubarak out of office”. She continues with the observation that “ten months later, (...) [the SCAF had] emerged as the most serious threat in the transition to democracy.” Ottaway is not, of course, blind to the facts of the history she is referring, nor can she be unaware of the illogic of her narrative. What is interesting about the switch in Ottaway’s assessment of the political situation in Egypt is not so much the exposure of the hypocritical and contradictory aspect of the SCAF’s “admirable job of maintaining order without violence”, but rather the realization that by imposing *non*violence, the military actually managed to stall the struggle for political freedom in Egypt. The egregiousness of these misrepresentations is actually Ottaway’s insistence on the fact that violence has no place in the narrative of democratic revolution.

Today it is clear that the emergent “transitional order”—first the SCAF and now the Morsi regime—have maintained a forceful, sometimes brutally violent, policy of imposing non-violence. And in the process the revolution—and its underlying democratic aspirations—have stalled, for the time being. During the two years that have passed since the 25 January revolt, protests continued and violence coincided with them. In this context, Rizk has argued that, “violence is a necessary means in the effort to undo the logic of a state dominated by elites and their foreign backers, who disregard the revolutionary demand of ‘bread, freedom, and social justice’.” One might disagree with his view. Yet, given the history of the Egyptian revolution so far, one should maybe consider at least the possibility that violence is most likely going to be the outcome of any effective opposition and contestation.

Even after revolutionaries chased away authoritarian rulers in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya by non-violent and violent tactics, state violence and protest violence continue. In light of this history, the view that democratic revolution is necessarily and consummately non-violent has been difficult to sustain. When violence is so associated with authoritarian state power, it is hard for some to recognize the democratic aspirations of those who continue revolution by any means necessary. When violence has erupted, it has often been roundly condemned and its causes ascribed to a “**lack of democratic culture among the masses**”, or, more ridiculously, to an ancient ancient **culture** of rule. The events of 1989 are now commonly considered as transitions that did lead quickly to liberal democracy, whereas the Arab region is still struggling and confronted with increasing violence. This could be an ideal moment to question some of the basic presumptions underpinning the 1989-model. Yet, as confrontations persisted between democratic activists and recalcitrant states, it led many observers to conclude that the Arab uprisings were more akin to the “failed” revolutions of the past (e.g., 1848).[9]

The reason it seems so difficult to associate violence with a democratic struggle might be attributed to a paradox which, according to Slavoj Žižek, characterizes most reflections on violence. Žižek writes,

At the forefront of our minds, the obvious signals of violence are acts of crime and terror, civil unrest, international conflict. But we should learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible “subjective” violence, violence performed by a clearly identifiable agent. We need to perceive the contours of the

background which generates such outbursts.[10]

With regard to the Arab uprisings, Žižek would argue that the contexts that generated street violence were shaped by a more *objective* kind of violence, one produced by the combination of authoritarian rule and thirty years of aggressive **neoliberal reform**. This reminds us of what we knew, namely that the ongoing uprisings were not just a revolt against authoritarian rule, but also expressions of a wider crisis in the social order of global capitalism. The demands of Arab protesters were, and are, formulated in local political terms, while at the same time, they resonate with a broader desire for greater social and economic justice, and an overall discontent with a **thirty-year history of neoliberal policies**.^[11]

Žižek's category of objective violence leads us to ask questions of an economic system whose components would include structural adjustment, privatization and the dismantling of public services. In the neoliberal world, economic restructurings are considered inevitable, like events of nature. Even if such policies are far from pleasant for those who must suffer them, they are not usually considered violence. Yet, insofar as they enforce disparity and poverty on the level of the everyday, these structures are coercive, non-democratic, and violent. But it's a kind of violence that the powerful impose upon the weak often precisely in the name of freedom and **orderly transition**. This violence, however, is invisible because its very 'normality' becomes the "zero-level standard" against which we perceive outbursts of subjective violence.^[12] In this way, thirty years of authoritarian, antidemocratic, and coercive structural adjustment becomes "the normal, peaceful state of things," whereas acts of revolt against this system becomes violence.

Since January 2011, many have attempted to say that the roots of revolt in the Arab world were to be found solely in 'bad governance', underplaying the fact that they were also related to the development models promoted by Western donors over the past three decades. **Adam Hanieh** has argued that the uprisings have provided neoliberal ideologists with the tools to "reabsorb and fashion dissent in its own image". Hanieh writes that "where authoritarian regimes have been the norm, [...] calls for institutional reform can be easily portrayed as democratic (and, indeed, they are explicitly framed within a discourse of democratization)". In this regard, we are reminded that today the IMF (along with other international institutions) continue to promote, this time in the name of post-revolution transition, the same economic models and reforms that caused the crises—and revolutionary responses—in the first place.

In conclusion, if violence is a component of revolutionary processes, for radical democracy, it might also tell us something about the opponent it faces and the contradictory conditions in which objective violence has taken shape. In the case of the Arab uprisings, it may tell us something about the politics of Western democratic governments and international donors who claim to support the democratic transitions in the region, and who do so by insisting—with violent force if necessary—on the continuation of neoliberal reform as it has always been. The outbursts of revolution have been unsettling for Western democracy promoters because they challenge the prevailing explanatory models, all of which arrive somewhere in the neoliberal endzone. By coming out into the streets in massive numbers, people not only rejected the existing strategies for a 'gradual' process of democratization, one which was based on close (mainly economic) cooperation between Western democratic countries and the incumbent authoritarian rulers, they also stood for the innermost consequences of the democratic ideals.

By revolting against the system or regime (*nizam*) which provided the conditions for objective violence, the Arab revolts were not so much an expression of a desire to become the sort of liberal democrats imagined by Western policy-makers, but actually showed that in this struggle—even if it is at times a violent one—the protesters have a more radical understanding and ideal of political freedom than that of the Western democracy promoters.

Notes

[1] I am thankful to Christopher Parker for pointing out this aspect of the relationship between political violence and non-violent democratic struggle.

[2] This is something Barrington Moore Jr already pointed out in 1968 with regard to the apparent contradiction between the American government's actions and statements at home and abroad. See: Barrington Moore Jr., "Thoughts on Violence and Democracy," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* (1968) Vol.29 (1), 2.

[3] Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books: 1990 [1963]), 18.

[4] Whether, the Egyptian revolt or any other uprising in the region could be labeled as revolutionary in Arendt's terms is another question. A revolution, according to Arendt, cannot just be associated with a *desire for liberation* (e.g., to be free from Monarchical oppression), but it must also be dictated by a *desire for freedom*. The latter, as stated above, necessitated the formation of a radically new form of government, or more broadly, entails an entirely new beginning, one that was never told or known before (Arendt, (1990 [1965]: 28-35). Maybe it is still too early to answer that question, as Arendt herself stated that "before [French or American revolutionaries] were engaged in what then turned out to be a revolution, none of the actors had the slightest premonition of what the plot of the new drama was going to be" (*Ibid.*, 29-30).

[5] Barrington Moore, Jr., 3.

[6] This is not new of course. Barrington Moore pointed out more that forty years ago that "Violence is an issue about which most people have strong opinions, perhaps even violent ones. One quite strongly held opinion about the connection between violence and democracy holds that modern Western democracy is both an improved substitute for violence and altogether incompatible with any form of violence (...) in my judgement [*sic*] it is a complacent misrepresentation of the present and the past", see Barrington Moore, Jr., 1.

[7] Assef Bayat, "Revolution in Bad Times," *New Left Review* (2013), 80: 57. If we relate Bayat's argument to Arendt's notion of revolution, Bayat prefers to talk about Arab "refolutions" instead of revolutions exactly because the trajectory of change in the region at the moment looks more reformist than revolutionary.

[8] Mahmoud Mamdani, "An African Reflection on Tahrir Square," *Globalizations* (2011), 8(5): 559-566.

[9] Robert Springborg, "Wither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?," *The International Spectator: Italian Journal of International Affairs* (2011), 46 (3), 5-12.

[10] Slavo Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008), 1.

[11] Koenraad Bogaert, "Contextualizing the Arab Revolts: The Politics Behind Three Decades of Neoliberalism in the Arab World," *Middle East Critique* (forthcoming 2013), 22(2).

[12] Žižek, 2.

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