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Abstract

Following the collapse of long-lived dictatorships in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, many analysts have turned their attention to China to identify possible stirrings of revolution. Of course, whereas efforts spiraled into revolutionary outcomes in the Middle East and North Africa, the Chinese Jasmine Revolution stimulated little domestic interest and failed to materialize into a popular movement. Beginning with the cases of Egypt and Tunisia, this article critically examines recent literature identifying the causes of the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions to develop several hypotheses on the sources of regime vulnerability in these countries and considers their applicability in explaining the exceptional resilience of single-party rule in China.

Keywords

China, Egypt, Tunisia, Arab Spring, revolution, authoritarianism, protest, social movement

Introduction

On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, an unknown street vendor in the small Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, triggered a succession of events that have fundamentally altered the political trajectory of not only his home country of Tunisia, but also created powerful reverberations across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Frustrated with repeated mistreatment at the hands of local officials, Bouazizi set himself aflame. Tapping into all manner of grievances held by Tunisia's citizens, this incident sparked protests across the country so intense that they quickly brought about the destabilization of the regime and soon drove the long-standing autocrat, Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, from power. As Ben Ali fled into exile, the Tunisian uprising triggered protests in countries across the MENA region (including Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain) now known as the 'Arab Spring.' Within months, Hosni Mubarak's regime had also collapsed. At the

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time of writing, protests in Syria have raged on for more than a year despite increasingly violent regime crackdowns.

As suggested by Blake Hounshell (2011), the sudden, unpredicted collapse of seemingly durable autocracies in Tunisia and Egypt has raised important questions about the conventional wisdom on authoritarian resilience. Consequently, the next question is 'Who is next?' For a number of commentators and academics, one common answer has been another presumably durable autocracy: China. In one noteworthy investigation of this question, Jay Ulfelder (2011) applied a combination of 17 statistical indicators for popular unrest from 163 countries and found that as of 2011, cases such as Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, and Libya appeared in the top 26 countries that were expected to experience nonviolent rebellion. Perhaps most surprisingly, China surpassed high-risk countries such as Iran and Egypt, ranking *first* among all 163 countries in its likelihood of experiencing regime-destabilizing unrest (Ulfelder, 2011). Ulfelder explained, 'China reportedly experiences tens of thousands of scattered protests, riots, and strikes each year, but many observers of that country's politics dismiss those events as background noise in an otherwise well-managed political system.' Citing recent riots and protests in Guangdong and Inner Mongolia, he suggested the People's Republic of China (PRC) might be 'riper for nonviolent rebellion than many China watchers believe' (Ulfelder, 2011).

The following article considers two prevailing clusters of explanations for the recent breakdown of autocracies in Tunisia and Egypt and considers their relevance for assessing the likelihood of authoritarian breakdown in China. The first section centers on the social drivers of unrest in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt: youth unemployment, socioeconomic inequality, official corruption, and an increasingly 'tech-savvy' population, while the second explores capacity-centered explanations for the strength and resilience of authoritarian regimes. This analysis finds that in spite of China's much more impressive economic performance, many factors often identified as the drivers of unrest in the MENA region have, in fact, also been present in China. Even in a context of growth, which might imply a greater satisfaction with the regime, social unrest has been on the rise. Additionally, prior to 2011, Tunisia and especially Egypt were rated as highly durable according to the primary elements of authoritarian capacity.

If divergence in repressive capacity played a critical role in determining the different political outcomes in China and the MENA cases, greater work remains to be done in the direction of cleanly identifying the sources of vulnerability within seemingly high-capacity regimes. Moving in this direction, the third section of this article explores a critical intervening variable that has received little attention in comparisons drawn between China and the Arab Spring autocracies: the dramatic difference in state centralization among these cases. Observing that uncoordinated 'parochial' protests aimed at local, community-specific grievances (rather than the regime itself) have emerged as the prevailing mode of contention in the PRC, the decentralized state structure of the Chinese state appears to deny popular claimants a unifying target to mobilize around and with it the political opportunities needed to develop forms of popular contention coordinated and sustained on a national level.

Social drivers of protest

Many analyses of the Arab Spring have emphasized the bottom-up factors driving Middle Eastern discontent. Looking at the participants involved in mass street demonstrations and their specific grievances, these interpretations have suggested unrest in the MENA region is most closely linked to socioeconomic inequities, the perception of official corruption, a large youth bulge, and the diffusion of modern communications technologies. In an observation that has given Beijing pause,

many of these factors are also present in contemporary Chinese society and have fueled a growing problem of social instability across the country. The political scientist Suisheng Zhao (2011) has written that 'The Jasmine Revolution that began in North Africa early 2011 frightened the Chinese government because China faces social and political tensions caused by rising inequality, injustice, and corruption.'

Economic performance

Any comparison of the social forces driving unrest in the Middle East and China must begin with a discussion of the diverging economic trajectories of these two regions. Over the past three decades, China has undergone dynamic economic development, its GDP growth maintaining an average annual rate of 10.0 percent from 1978 to 2010 (World Bank, 2012). During the same period, MENA economies have grown at a comparatively sluggish rate of 3.59 percent, with Egypt (5.10 percent) and Tunisia (4.52 percent) only modestly outperforming the region as a whole (World Bank, 2012). Clearly, this variation in overall economic growth is no trivial consideration. As noted by Huntington (1991), Diamond and Linz (1989), and Bermeo (1990), in autocracies lacking the kind of legitimacy provided by democratic procedures, the maintenance of political power is heavily dependent on economic performance criteria. The large-*N* quantitative research of Przeworski and Limongi has provided some general support for this hypothesis, demonstrating that autocracies with high per capita incomes have been remarkably highly resilient to collapse (1997: 159–60).

Breaking in some respects with these findings, Geddes (1999) and, more recently, Ulfelder (2005: 311–34) have found that poor long-term economic performance in itself has little to do with destabilizing autocratic regimes. While low growth 'is never good news,' only sudden and severe economic crises in the short term seem to be capable of destabilizing otherwise-resilient personalist and single-party autocracies. Since the 1970s, single-party autocracies that have broken down have experienced average declines in per capita income of 4 percent in the year before their respective political transitions (Geddes, 1999: 134–6). This pattern has clearly been evident in cases such as the Philippines in 1986 and Indonesia in 1998, where regime breakdown was preceded by steep and sudden economic declines.

Considering that the Arab Spring uprisings have emerged in the wake of the global financial crisis of 2008, a sudden economic downswing seems to be a likely source of the internal discontent that emerged in many MENA states. However, according to World Bank data, the cases in question experienced tepid growth, not outright collapse, in the lead up to the turbulent year of 2011. Tunisia's GDP per capita increased 3.5 percent in 2008, 2.0 percent in 2009, and 2.6 percent in 2010, while Egypt's grew by 5.3 percent in 2008, 2.9 percent in 2009, and 3.3 percent in 2010. These rates were quite unimpressive in comparison with China's rapid per capita growth rates of 9.0 percent in 2008, 8.6 percent in 2009, and 9.8 percent in 2010 (World Bank, 2012). On the other hand, they were not akin to the kind of deep economic crises that have typically destabilized autocratic regimes.

China's sustained growth amid global economic turmoil may well have bolstered the regime's performance legitimacy and dampened short-term pressures for regime change. But in the greater East Asian region in particular, economic achievement has not had a straightforward causal relationship with the resilience of autocratic regimes. In Singapore and Malaysia, economic success has walked hand in hand with durable single-party rule. Severe economic crises helped terminate the regimes of Suharto in Indonesia and Marcos in the Philippines. Taiwan and South Korea also enjoyed strong economic growth in the 1980s, but nevertheless experienced growing domestic challenges that culminated in political transitions.

Importantly, China's growth has come with serious social consequences. Unemployment, inequality, and official corruption (factors that helped fuel popular discontent in the MENA region) have also appeared in China at high levels and fueled increasingly frequent outbreaks of social unrest. Social and demographic trends, not the least being its now (as of 2010) shrinking labor force, are working against China's ability to sustain near double-digit GDP growth rates in the coming decades (Chang, 2012; Goldstone, 2011a). Consequently, it has become increasingly important to look beyond China's current rates of economic growth and consider if other factors may also be at play in sustaining regime resilience.

Angry, unemployed youths

Writing in *Foreign Policy* in early 2011, Ellen Knickmeyer described the 'chronically unemployed twenty-somethings' across the Middle East and North Africa as the 'Arab world's youth army,' a group she identified as the leading social force behind the uprisings and political upheavals spreading across the region. In Tunisia and Egypt, high fertility rates had produced a substantial youth bulge, such that by 2005 some 56.1 percent and 62.7 percent of citizens, respectively, were under the age of 30. Meanwhile, in China, family-planning policies since the early 1980s have kept the youth cohort to a smaller size. In 2005, only 45.3 percent of the population was under 30 (Leahy, 2007: 87–90). If the youth were the critical foot soldiers of the 2011 social unrest in the Middle East, any emergent Chinese protest movement would have a comparably smaller social base to draw recruits from.

In Egypt and Tunisia, this large, educated youth cohort became increasingly frustrated with its poor job prospects, which likely played a major role in fueling recent unrest. Many of these educated youth joined the growing ranks of the *hittistes* (Arab slang for 'those who lean against walls') (Knickmeyer, 2011). In Tunisia and Egypt, official unemployment in 2005 had reached rates of 14.2 percent and 11.2 percent, respectively, leaving many youths frustrated with the political and economic status quo and the time needed to plot and organize anti-regime collective actions.

Official data has suggested a rosier picture in China, where despite a reported growth in unemployment, the official unemployment rate has remained comparatively low at 4.1 percent (United Nations Development Program, 2010). By many accounts, these figures understate the problem, as they reflect only the number of citizens who have formally registered for unemployment benefits (*China Labor Bulletin*, 2007; Giles et al., 2005: 168). Data from household surveys has suggested that the actual unemployment rate has been much higher, reaching figures as high as 14.0 percent or 20.0 percent since the late 1990s (Giles et al., 2005: 163). According to the estimates of Giles et al., unemployment has been highest among young workers between the ages of 16 and 30 and permanent urban residents, with young urban residents having an estimated unemployment rate of 24.3 percent in 2000 (2005: 163).

The impact of youth unemployment might also be enhanced by the disproportionately poor job prospects of college graduates. The number of graduates unable to find work has expanded rapidly from 750,000 in 2003 to 1.2 million in 2005 and almost 2 million in 2009, that is, about 32 percent of all graduates (Zhao and Huang, 2010: 2). According to some recent research, these official numbers are also likely to understate the problem (Zhao and Huang, 2010: 2). Based on the observed increase in the involvement of white-collar workers and university students in many recent protest actions (Chen, 2009: 87–106),[1] growing frustrations among this critical and highly trained cohort of unemployed youths could potentially be a driving force behind social unrest heading forward.

Inequality

As noted by a number of commentators, widening socioeconomic inequality has also helped drive the Arab Spring protests in Tunisia and Egypt (Knickmeyer, 2011). Seeing their poverty and material hardship contrasted with that of those better connected to the regime, working-class citizens joined educated youths as they poured into the streets in the regime-toppling protests of 2011. In protests preceding the Arab Spring in Tunisia and Egypt, popular grievances centered on the regime's inability to curtail rising food prices or provide other basic services (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011: 2–6). In Egypt, more than 1000 protest actions took place from 1998 to 2004. After the implementation of economic liberalization policies, which cut social services and government spending, protests increased by 200 percent, amounting to 250 in 2004 alone. In April 2008, as many as a half-million Egyptians participated in more than 400 actions, including a general strike centering in al-Mahalla al-Kubra and involving tens of thousands of state workers, youth activists, and professionals. Meanwhile, in Tunisia, materially aggrieved citizens organized collective actions against a mining company in 2008, which soon came to involve protestors demonstrating against rising inflation and unemployment in other parts of the country (Ottaway and Hamzawy, 2011: 2–6).

Data on socioeconomic inequality suggests the gap between the rich and poor has widened even further in China. In 2001, Egypt's Gini index for the distribution of family inequality was reported at 34.4 (90th most unequal of 136 countries), whereas Tunisia's was estimated at 40.0 (61st most unequal) in 2005. China's figure of 41.5 (52nd most unequal) in 2007 (*CIA World Factbook*, 2011) indicates that socioeconomic inequality has widened dramatically during the deepening of economic reforms from the mid-1990s to early 2000s. At this time, state-provided social services were dramatically cut and large state-owned enterprises were restructured or privatized, leading many recently laid-off factory workers to join the growing ranks of the unemployed and the poor (Wang, 2006: 252–8). At a time in which a record 1.11 million Chinese have become millionaires (Kroll, 2011), Huang (2008: 246–50) estimates that the country's poorest citizens have actually experienced absolute declines in living standards. Meanwhile, a 2004 household survey revealed that 71.7 percent of Chinese respondents considered income in the country to be either 'somewhat large' or 'too large' and held the view that the 'rich get richer, [while the] poor get poorer' (Whyte, 2010: 306–7). In short, in the midst of growing national prosperity, working-class Chinese have seen living standards drop in relative and, more recently, absolute terms.

In a similar vein to the economic protests reported in Egypt and Tunisia over the past decade, materially driven 'subsistence crises' have fueled growing social unrest among China's working class (Feng, 2000: 41–63; Tong and Lei, 2010: 490). A 2004 survey indicated that nearly 73 percent of public officials in China considered 'income distribution' to be their greatest concern (*People's Daily*, 2004). Frustrations over extreme inequality have also percolated upward from the lowest rungs of society into the middle class. As illustrated by the survey data of Brockmann et al. (2009), even the 'winners' of market reforms have experienced declining levels of subjective well-being. These 'frustrated achievers' have become increasingly dissatisfied as they have witnessed an even narrower slice of Chinese society achieve dramatically higher levels of relative affluence (Brockmann et al., 2009: 387–405). Clearly, following the economically motivated protests in Egypt identified in the late 1990s and mid-2000s, issues of socioeconomic injustice have also become a troubling source of social instability in present-day China.

Corruption

By many accounts, popular discontent in the MENA region has been further inflamed by the pervasive presence of official corruption. Stuart Levey (2011) has pointed out that official corruption has been a 'key grievance' driving protests throughout the Arab world – a reality highlighted by the recent trials of Ben Ali and Mubarak for corrupt practices ranging from money laundering to drug trafficking. If corruption in itself was a driver of political instability in the Arab Spring, then Beijing has reason for concern. According to the 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), a measure of the overall extent of corruption as perceived by foreign and domestic country experts and business leaders, China received a score of 3.5, placing it 78th in the world out of 178 participating countries. Tunisia and Egypt were scored at 4.3 and 3.1, respectively, placing them at the ranks of 59th and 98th overall (Transparency International, 2011). The Pew Forum's Global Attitudes Project and *The China Survey* have also both reported high levels of official corruption. According to the former, 78 percent of Chinese respondents considered corrupt officials to be a 'very' or 'moderately big' problem (Pew Global Attitudes Survey in China, 2008); the latter found that 67.5 percent of respondents viewed official corruption to be a 'serious' problem (see Harmel and Yeh, 2011: 7). In short, much like their counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, average Chinese consider corruption to be a widespread and very serious problem.

Scholars have been in general agreement that corruption is present at high levels in China, but not on the broader ramifications of this problem. Minxin Pei (2006) has argued that pervasive 'decentralized predation' by state agents will gradually result in economic stagnation and malaise in China. Francis Fukuyama (2010: 35) has argued that China's rule of law is 'good enough' to contain corruption and sustain economic growth. Kellee Tsai (2007: 6–11) has even found that corruption and other adaptive informal practices have been essential to China's successful economic transition.

While the broader impact of corruption on China's economic vibrancy remains in dispute, it is clear that the perception of official corruption has appeared as a driver of social unrest with growing frequency. As revealed in Chen's analysis of mass incidents reported in Chinese news, protests directly motivated by land seizures, unpaid wages, or factory layoffs are often closely linked to complaints over cadre corruption (2009: 90–95). These 'anger-venting' mass incidents have revealed the groundswell of frustration against corrupt and abusive local officials that has marked many of China's communities (Fewsmith, 2008). Often involving the destruction of the property and offices of local governments, these mass protests (in a noteworthy parallel to the case of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia) have been sparked by specific incidents of officials abusing citizens.

Two recent major mass incidents have been triggered by actions such as local security forces' mistreatment of a female street vendor in Guangdong and the mysterious death of an anticorruption activist in Hubei Province (McLaughlin, 2011). While these anger-venting mass incidents have typically been restricted to specific communities, involving no visible coordination or linkages across localities, they have a common theme: they all represent popular backlashes against perceived official malfeasance. As noted by Ben Heineman (2011), 'this corruption – both in the sense of officials/cadres taking money illicitly or in the arbitrary use of "law" for personal ends – only increases, in turn, the pressure for protests.' Much like the now-toppled regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, the Chinese government has not effectively reined in the persistent problem of official corruption, an outcome that adds significantly to the country's likelihood of experiencing destabilizing outbursts of social unrest.

This analysis has revealed that while China has a significantly smaller youth cohort, it has comparable levels of inequality and official corruption. It may also have a similar problem of unemployment, which is most pronounced among the college-educated. Importantly, these drivers of

discontent have helped fuel the rapid growth of social unrest in China. As reported by the Ministry of Public Security, 'mass incidents' in the country increased from 10,000 in 1994 to 87,000 in 2005 (Kahn, 2006), with some accounts suggesting the number had accelerated to 180,000 by 2010 (Orlik, 2011). Clearly, as reported by Zhao (2011), Ulfelder (2011), and others, social discontent is very much on the rise in China. Yet in an important deviation from the MENA cases, the prevailing mode of contention in China has been the parochial protest, aimed at specific local functionaries of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), but not the regime itself – an outcome discussed at some length below.

Authoritarian capacity

In many explanations of the Arab Spring, commentators have followed the conventional wisdom embraced by researchers of authoritarianism in academia, which centers on the capacity of autocratic regimes to maintain elite cohesion while also stamping out popular challenges. In this view, authoritarian breakdown is less associated with the tactics, grievances, or organization of popular protests and more with the top-down deficiencies of regimes themselves. In one such interpretation of the Arab Spring, Jack Goldstone (2011b) has argued:

> Although such regimes often appear unshakable, they are actually highly vulnerable, because the very strategies they use to stay in power make them brittle, not resilient. It is no coincidence that although popular protests have shaken much of the Middle East, the only revolutions to succeed so far – those in Tunisia and Egypt – have been against modern sultans.

In other words, the primary driving factor behind the Arab Spring lay in the preexisting structural weaknesses of the regimes themselves. The regimes of Egypt and Tunisia were slowly being corroded by their personalism and lack of effective institutional mechanisms for maintaining long-term internal cohesion among elites and control over society. However, as admitted by Goldstone, this 'degree of ... weakness is often visible only in retrospect,' appearing after a regime has fallen in the face of popular challenges (2011b: 8–16). This is demonstrated by the many ways in which the MENA regimes, especially Egypt, received extraordinarily high marks in terms of their degree of 'capacity.' As noted by Tarek Masoud, up to the turbulent year of 2011, Egypt in particular was known in academic circles as an 'exemplar of something we called "durable authoritarianism" – a new breed of modern dictatorship that had figured out how to tame the political, economic, and social forces that routinely did in autocracy's lesser variants' (2011: 22–34). The durability of this brand of dictatorship was based in an explanatory variable often used in studies of authoritarianism: the overarching quality of 'authoritarian capacity.' This variable involves three primary elements: coercive capacity, political capacity, and discretionary control over the economy (Way, 2008: 55–69). On all three criteria, the autocracies of Egypt, Tunisia, and China have exhibited high levels of strength, indicating the need to add greater precision to this approach.

Internal security forces

The first of these elements involves an effective internal security force, which enhances a regime's 'coercive capacity' – its ability to 'prevent or crack down on opposition protest' (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 57). In most respects, China is thought to have a powerful and effective coercive apparatus. The military and internal security forces have demonstrated their willingness to apply violence when requested – both at Tiananmen in 1989 and in thousands of lesser-known cases (Thompson,

2001: 63–83). Moreover, in the post-Tiananmen years, the country's internal security apparatus, the People's Armed Police (PAP), has expanded to more than 1 million personnel (supplementing local police forces), has an annual budget of nearly US$2 billion, and has received advanced training and equipment for crowd dispersal (Sun and Wu, 2009: 107–28).

In much the same manner, both Egypt and Tunisia also received high marks in their degree of coercive capacity. Citing the exceptional 'robustness' of the coercive apparatuses of these Middle Eastern regimes, Bellin (2004: 139–57) and Brownlee (2010: 468–89) considered this capacity to be an important reason for the remarkable resilience of dictatorships in the region. Heading into 2011, Egypt in particular was flush with roughly US$1.3 billion in annual military aid from the USA, its internal security forces included in excess of 1.4 million personnel, and these forces had repeatedly demonstrated their willingness and capability to crack down on all manner of regime opponents, ranging from moderate politicians to radical militants (Cook, 2009: 3).

Beyond the impressive ability to harass and intimidate opponents as well as crack down on demonstrators found in all three regimes, a lower-intensity form of repression (Levitsky and Way, 2010: 58), media control, takes a central position in discussions of the Arab Spring uprisings. Clearly, new social media vehicles, such as Twitter and Facebook, played a critical role in enabling opposition activists in these two MENA cases to express publicly criticisms of their respective governments and to organize massive anti-regime street demonstrations.

If social media and Internet usage challenge existing modes of authoritarian control, then China's current regime has serious cause for concern. Chinese society has been affected by the rapid diffusion of these technologies in a similar fashion to the MENA region at large. In Egypt and Tunisia, Internet penetration rates exploded from 0.7 percent and 1.0 percent, respectively, in 2000 to 21.1 percent and 33.4 percent, respectively, in 2009. Similarly, in China, Internet penetration has accelerated from 1.7 percent of the population using the web in 2000 to 28.7 percent in 2009 (Internet World Stats, 2012).

Of course, as noted by Lynch (2011) and Morozov (2011), Internet technology and social media present a double-edged sword to opposition activists in authoritarian contexts. These technologies not only create new opportunities for anti-regime activists, but can also help authoritarian regimes to monitor, silence, and even distract these oppositionists as well as their supporters (Lynch, 2011: 305–6; Morozov, 2011). Observers noting Beijing's 'Great Firewall' which blocks politically sensitive websites, its army of 50,000 government web censors, and its innovative technique of 'crowdsourcing' Internet monitoring to private '50-centers' who are paid small amounts to report on their fellow web-users have often held up China as an exemplar of media control and censorship (Diamond, 2010: 74). Commentators such as James Fallows (2011) have argued that the ingenuity of China's Internet censorship, which he brands 'flexible repression,' has in many ways helped it avert an Arab-Spring-style uprising.

While certainly reasonable, upon closer inspection weighing the media-control capacity of various autocracies is difficult – particularly during an era of 'authoritarian learning' in which autocracies are quick to adopt the best practices for quelling unrest from their nondemocratic counterparts (Silitski, 2006). After all, the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia were both noted for their extensive filtering of web content, blocking of opposition websites, revocation of press licenses for media outlets that published politically sensitive news, and use of the Internet and social media sites to conduct surveillance of political and social activists (Deibart et al., 2010: 537–44, 581–8). In the end, while these efforts were clearly insufficient in preventing enterprising activists from using these technologies to mobilize anti-regime collective actions in Tunisia and Egypt, Chinese 'netizens' have also proven adept at using text-message and web technology to circumvent state censorship to expose official malfeasance and challenge public officials.

Such online activism has even spilled over into the coordination of mass protest actions, such as a 2007 demonstration against the construction of a chemical plant in Xiamen that involved as many

as 20,000 participants (Lim, 2007). While the Chinese regime has maintained an impressive coercive capacity, contentious collective action has nevertheless been frequent and intense. But unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, this contention has been sporadic, localized, and targeted at corrupt subnational officials, not the national regime per se. In addition, while calls to organize a 'Jasmine Revolution' modeled on the Arab Spring successfully evaded censors and were distributed widely across China's cyberspace, few citizens responded with enthusiasm or appeared at designated public gatherings (Ramzy, 2012). In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, these recent episodes in China suggest that while communications technologies have certainly helped mobilize popular contention, citizens have overwhelmingly used these tactics not to challenge the regime itself, but rather to confront local cadres based on local grievances.

Economic control

A second element of authoritarian capacity, a regime's discretionary control over the economy, is critical to funding a robust and highly trained security apparatus as well as supplying rents that can be distributed to supporters in exchange for lasting loyalty (Way, 2008: 55–69). It reduces the risk that private economic interests might provide much-needed financial support to potential regime opponents. This state control over economic resources limits the demands the state must make in extracting revenue from the public and enables the regime to reward loyalists, buy off potential challengers, and starve opponents (Way, 2008: 64–5).

Of course, when considering the distribution of economic resources within the MENA region, it must first be noted that among leading oil-exporting countries, such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Bahrain, no autocratic regime collapsed during the turbulent year of 2011. Libya, which was toppled in large part through a NATO military intervention, stands as the lone exception (Ross, 2011; US Energy Information Administration, 2011). Clearly, an economy that is highly dependent upon oil exports offers major benefits to an autocratic ruler, as is often noted by proponents of the 'resource curse' hypothesis, and those countries most strongly affected by Arab Spring protests were among the poorest in the MENA region in terms of oil resources.

In both Egypt and Tunisia, scholars have commented that while these authoritarian regimes lacked the oil reserves of many of their neighbors, maintaining control over their economies remained a priority. While they implemented some liberalizing reforms, these regimes by and large had steadfastly sustained their discretionary grip over the economy (Bellin, 2004: 139), which largely contributed to the creation of a 'rent-seeking urban bourgeoisie and landed elite with no interest in democracy or political participation' (King, 2007: 434). In much the same way, over the past three decades the CCP has also relaxed its controls over the state socialist economy. Much like their counterparts in the MENA region, China specialists have generally not seen market reforms as eroding the regime's capacity for maintaining political and social control. Rather, leading researchers such as Tsai (2007), Solinger (2008), and Chen and Dickson (2010) have found that the emerging social forces that were expected to challenge the regime's grip on power, namely an increasingly politically assertive bourgeoisie, have achieved their material economic gains in concert with the status quo political regime. They have consequently demonstrated a remarkably high level of support for it.

Political institutions

Another element that enhances the durability of authoritarian regimes is the presence of a powerful, highly institutionalized political party (Brownlee, 2007: 42–3; Geddes, 1999: 135; Magaloni, 2008:

715–42). Many commentaries written immediately after the Arab Spring argued that the 'sultanistic' nature of authoritarian rule in Egypt and Tunisia, compared with the better institutionalized single-party rule of the CCP, made these regimes vulnerable to internal divisions and collapse (Fukuyama, 2011; Goldstone, 2011b: 8–16). According to the large-*N* empirical work of Geddes (1999: 131–2) and Brownlee (2007), single-party regimes have far exceeded their personalist counterparts in longevity. Presumably, if Ben Ali and Mubarak ran their regimes as personal fiefdoms, relying primarily on kinsmen and cronies for their support, this made them much more exposed to popular challenges and internal defections than China's better institutionalized single-party regime.

However, variation in institutional capacity among these three cases is not so transparent. Only a cursory examination of research on Egypt and Tunisia reveals that until 2011 students of authoritarianism believed these countries were bolstered by effective institutional mechanisms, ranging from hegemonic parties to nominally democratic elections. Brownlee (2007), King (2007: 433–59), Lust (2009), and Blaydes (2011: 2–5) identified political institutions in Egypt and Tunisia (that is, hegemonic party apparatuses, legislatures, and elections) as critical regime supports that helped manage internal divisions and co-opt potential challengers. The Chinese regime has also received high marks for its institutionalization, with scholars noting the CCP's highly specialized institutions and smooth, merit-based methods for cadre advancement (Nathan, 2003: 6–17; Shambaugh, 2009). Meanwhile, others have inspected internal party documents (Gilley, 2003: 19–22; Zong, 2002) and studied patterns in cadre promotion (Shih et al., 2012: 166–87) to suggest that it is personal and faction-based connections that drive advancement in the party, not objective performance criteria. Supporting this view, the spectacular and intrigue-laced collapse of Bo Xilai in recent months has revealed serious fractures and divisions underlying China's otherwise well-managed political system. These findings suggest that while China clearly appears to have an impressive repressive capacity in many respects, the opacity of the political system may mask vulnerabilities that do exist. Egypt and Tunisia are instructive in that the fragility of these seemingly durable autocracies only became apparent after they were challenged by coordinated, national-level protest movements. Consequently, studies of authoritarian resilience should ask not only whether a regime is strong or weak in terms of capacity, but whether elements of the regime tend to facilitate or inhibit national-level contention from emerging in the first place.

The missing variables: centralization and modes of contention

This analysis does not suggest that the PRC is on the verge of collapse. Rather, when looking at the dynamics of state–society interactions within China, several sources of its resilience have almost uniformly been overlooked in comparative studies of authoritarianism. Speaking to a deeper problem in the current literature on authoritarianism, scholars have tended to focus on elite-level factors such as competition between majority and minority factions within regimes (see Geddes, 1999) and to ignore protest actors as independent agents of popular mobilization in their own right. As noted by Eric McGlinchey (2009: 124–5), 'The existing literature, perhaps understandably given its focus on institutional weakness, [has] overemphasized state variables while underemphasizing the causal role of social opposition movements.' Sharing a similar sentiment, Bunce and Wolchik have been 'extremely skeptical that structural factors alone' can explain popular revolutions, and emphasize the need for an integrated approach that appreciates the causal role of popular oppositions as agents of authoritarian breakdown: 'Put simply, structure, agency, and process are all important' (2009: 70).

First, by leaving social opposition movements outside their analyses and focusing on authoritarian states as entities that can be characterized as having high or low 'strength' or 'capacity', students

of authoritarianism have missed an important consideration that has taken central importance in the parallel subfield of contentious politics: the way in which the state and other political environments can act as 'structure[s] of political opportunities' that create certain 'constraints or open avenues' for different kinds of individual and group political actions, greatly influencing the manner of their political behavior (Eisinger, 1973: 11–12). Presumably, particular structures of opportunities might alternatively facilitate or inhibit the development of sustained, large-scale, high-participant forms of popular contention seen on the streets of Tunis and Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Second, the treatment of popular protests as residual phenomena deriving from authoritarian weakness has meant that researchers have often failed to disaggregate different modes of popular contention that tend to appear in these various political opportunity structures. Of particular relevance to this comparison between the cases of Tunisia and Egypt, on the one hand, and China, on the other, is the distinction between 'national' and 'parochial' forms of popular contention. As best articulated in the writings of Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, parochial forms of contention are framed around material and issue-specific grievances, lack broad and coordinated coalitions of social actors who are based in diverse societal and economic sectors and geographic localities, and target particular and usually local officials or layers of the state. National forms of contention or movements are framed in general and inclusive terms that incorporate outside groups, coordinated across many previously unconnected sites and social actors, and united against a single unifying target, such as a national government or leader (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 31–4).

Of importance to studying comparative cases of authoritarian resilience or breakdown, parochial forms of contention are fragmented and uncoordinated on a national scale. Since they can be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, they generally present a manageable challenge to authoritarian regimes – including those that tend to rate as low-capacity regimes. These latter, nationally coordinated movements can quickly overwhelm even the highest capacity regimes, such as the Shah's Iran, the Philippines under Marcos, regimes across Central and Eastern Europe, and even the seemingly durable Mubarak and Ben Ali dictatorships in Egypt and Tunisia, leading to elite fragmentation and collapse.

An investigation that treats the state as a structure of political opportunities for particular forms of popular contention would begin by identifying common features of these regimes and their respective state structures that might enable popular claimants rapidly to mobilize diverse segments of society in concerted action against their respective governments. One important feature that immediately comes to attention is the extraordinarily high degree of state centralization in both Egypt and Tunisia, which contrasts dramatically with China's decentralized state structure. In this context, centralization refers to the distribution of 'responsibility for planning, management and resource raising and allocation' between 'the central government and its agencies [and] the lower levels of government' (Work, 2002: 5) and, of particular importance in autocratic regimes, the distribution of power over a state's coercive resources and discretion over decisions related to the suppression of popular opponents.

Yet, while a half-century ago Arthur Maass (1959: 9) pointed out that concerns related to the 'distribution and division of governmental power' have been fundamental issues in political science dating back to the time of Aristotle, few recent scholars have considered how major variation on this most basic element of an authoritarian state's structure might influence its vulnerability to popular challenges from below. Moreover, as noted by Falleti (2010: 6–7), we are seeing a growing number of countries around the world experimenting with dramatic decentralizing reforms. This shift toward greater decentralization has extended to nondemocracies, which, according to World Bank (2011) data, distributed an average of 14.9 percent of all government expenditure at the subnational level in the 1970s and 1980s, a figure that surged in the 1990s to 32.8 percent by 1999.

At a point in history in which more and more autocracies have decentralized, it has become important to explore how this most basic change to state structures may impact the way in which popular actors interact with and contest the authoritarian state.

While research on the subject of centralization and decentralization has been extensive on the global level, driven by the issue's emphasis on international financial institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, it has been relatively limited in the MENA region. Available research, mostly on topics such as development and governance, immediately reveals an extremely high level of centralization in many MENA countries, including Egypt and Tunisia (Amin and Ebel, 2006; Tosun and Yilmaz, 2008). This is reflective of the policy choices made by MENA regimes, which unlike many countries in Latin America, Africa, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, did not undertake the decentralizing reforms promoted by the World Bank and other international financial institutions in the 1980s and 1990s (World Bank, 2008).

Looking at available data on subnational shares of public expenditure and revenue, intergovernmental transfers, and the distribution of authority over personnel management and internal security forces, researchers in the mid- to late 2000s described the cases of Tunisia and Egypt as extraordinarily centralized in terms of functional and coercive state power (Boex, 2011; Tosun and Yilmaz, 2008: 11–12; United Nations Development Program, Program on Governance in the Arab Region, 2009). In fact, writing in 2006, Amin and Ebel noted that 'one cannot [even] track how Egypt compares with other countries because *all spending is carried out by central entities*; thus expenditure flow data gets reported by ministry sector rather than by function' (2006: 3, emphasis added). In their overall analysis of the Egyptian state, these authors specifically described Egypt as having 'one of the most centralized public sector systems in the world' (Amin and Ebel, 2006: 9).

Compared with the MENA cases of Tunisia and Egypt, China has been an ideal case of what can be termed 'decentralized authoritarianism' (Landry, 2008). In Tunisia and Egypt, subnational governments respectively controlled 12.1 percent and 15.6 percent of all government expenditure (Tosun and Yilmaz, 2008: 27). In China, an average of 54.84 percent of fiscal expenditure was spent at the subnational level from 1995 to 1998 (World Bank, 2011). The degree of decentralization in post-Maoist China has been extremely remarkable. As noted by Landry (2008: 6), from 1972 to 2000 nondemocracies' average subnational share of state expenditure was 17.76 percent. The country, in other words, has been three times as decentralized as the average authoritarian regime, and nearly four times as decentralized as its counterparts in the MENA region.

This variation in measures of state centralization has likely played an important role in facilitating the outbreak of nationwide forms of popular contention in settings such as Egypt and Tunisia, while promoting only parochial forms of contention in decentralized states such as China. According to Alexis de Tocqueville (1955: 76), the extraordinary centralization of successive governments proved critical in bringing about the revolutionary upheavals that shook France during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. More recently, scholars of contentious politics have argued that the growing centralization associated with the birth of the modern national state was intimately linked to the appearance of nationwide movements of popular contention. According to Sidney Tarrow (1994: 72):

> As the activities of national states expanded and penetrated society, they also caused the targets of collective action to shift from private and local actors to national centers of decision-making. The national state not only centralized the targets of collective action; it involuntarily provided a fulcrum for ... standard forms of collective action.

Instead of taking localized, particular, and bifurcated actions that were restricted to subnational targets, involved direct action, and were carried out by specific social groups, contentious repertoires evolved into genuine national protest movements (Tarrow, 1994: 6; Tilly, 1993: 272). Following the logic of this presumed linkage between state centralization and the appearance of national forms of protest, acts of popular contention in more decentralized authoritarian settings are expected to emerge in a recurrently fragmented and localized form, failing to undergo the process of 'upward scale shift' to national protest movements (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 95). According to terminology applied by Tarrow (1994), this limited mode of protest does not diffuse a general, 'modular repertoire' of contention throughout a national society. Additionally, it lacks broad, coordinated coalitions of social actors who are based in diverse societal and economic sectors and geographic localities (Tarrow, 1994: 72).

When comparing World Bank (2011) Government Finance Statistics (GFS) data on fiscal decentralization (available for the years 1972 to 2000) with historical cases of authoritarian breakdown during the 'third wave of democracy,' one can observe a general global pattern linking high levels of state centralization with sudden instances of regime collapse (Huntington, 1991; Ulfelder, 2005: 327–30). Among the 45 historical autocracies with available data, the proportion of government expenditure at the subnational level has averaged 18 percent. For the 36 regimes that have collapsed since the 1970s, the share of subnational spending during their years under autocratic rule averaged 17 percent. There is a great deal of variation within this group, including a subgroup of highly centralized autocracies such as Marcos's Philippines (11.8 percent subnational spending) and Suharto's Indonesia (11.9 percent subnational spending). Preceding the Arab Spring by decades, these two centralized regimes (as well as a cascade of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, such as Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Romania) broke down in the face of national bursts of popular protest.

Meanwhile, the smaller group of 10 surviving autocracies had an average subnational expenditure of 26 percent. Among these survivors, there is a large degree of variation in the measure of fiscal decentralization. These cluster into three general groupings: a highly centralized pair of resource-rich states in the Middle East, that is Iran (3.0 percent) and Bahrain (3.2 percent); three very diverse autocracies in the medium-range in terms of decentralization, that is Malaysia (19.1 percent), Zimbabwe (18.1 percent), and Azerbaijan (24.1 percent); and five more-decentralized states, that is Tajikistan (30.9 percent), Kazakhstan (31.4 percent), Belarus (32.6 percent), Russia (38.1 percent), and China (54.8 percent). In short, in a global-historical sense, all else being equal, decentralized regimes (such as China, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Belarus) have outpaced their more centralized neighbors. China has avoided nationalized waves of protest that have affected neighboring countries such as Indonesia and the Philippines. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan, Russia, Tajikistan, and Belarus have resisted the wave of 'color revolutions' that toppled regimes across the former Soviet Union in the 2000s.

A closer look at China, the world's most decentralized autocracy, provides evidence that autocracies with very low levels of centralization deny popular claimants the opportunity to use an intrusive, centralized state as a common, unifying target for mobilizing national-level contention. Meanwhile, this structure creates opportunities for localized, parochial forms of contention. In a pattern noted by a number of leading specialists in Chinese contentious politics, the decentralized state structure of the PRC has encouraged popular claimants to take parochial collective actions aimed at corrupt and abusive local officials (Cai, 2008: 411–32; Lee, 2007; O'Brien and Li, 2006). The research of Yongshun Cai has suggested that by granting local officials greater authority within their jurisdiction, the center avoids blame for local authorities' official misdeeds and their use of repression (2008: 415). This reality grants the center a degree of plausible deniability when acts of

state violence occur at the local level – helping the national state preserve its legitimacy even when coercion is used against protestors.

As noted by O'Brien and Li (2006: 27), gaps between the center and local authorities in the Chinese state provide a 'structural opening' that local claimants can capitalize upon in launching collective actions aimed at addressing their grievances. By framing their protests against local cadres as defending the laws and regulations promulgated by the center, these 'rightful resisters' can seek allies within the state or in the wider public, such as media outlets, and avoid the accusation that they are antistate or unpatriotic (O'Brien and Li, 2006: 23). By framing their contention in such a way, claimants develop repertoires of contention and bases of support that are conducive to local and particularized, but not national anti-system modes of action. As noted by Tilly and Tarrow (2007), effective social movement campaigns require a 'social movement base.' This refers to 'movement organizations, networks, participants, and the accumulated cultural artifacts, memories, and traditions that contribute to social movement campaigns' (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 114). In a decentralized state structure, in which localized acts of contention often prove effective and more broadly coordinated efforts are extraordinarily risky to the participants involved, claimants tend to construct bases oriented around particular and specific, not national and inclusive concerns, and parochial, not national collective action becomes the prevailing mode of contention.

In widely publicized outbreaks of unrest in China, elements of parochial forms of contention have prevailed. High-profile outbreaks of protest that have diffused across regions, such as the November 2008 strike of taxi drivers that originated in Chongqing and the rapid succession of strikes in auto-parts factories across China's industrial Southeast from May to July 2010, have involved scattered acts of contention that targeted subnational officials and governments, involved no observable cross-regional coordination, and were resolved through interactions between subnational authorities and strike organizers within their various jurisdictions (*China Labor Bulletin*, 2010; Hess, 2009: 61–77; Richburg, 2010; *Straits Times*, 2010). In major cases of not-in-my-backyard-style environmental contention, such as the demonstrations in Xiamen during 2006 and Dalian during 2011 against paraxylene plants (which involved as many as 20,000 participants in the former case), protestors have targeted municipal officials and been successful in compelling them to relocate polluting industries outside of their local communities (Bradsher, 2011; Lim, 2007). These cases support the findings of Cai (2008) in his study of 78 incidents of popular contention in China from 1995 to 2006. In more than 80 percent of these incidents, the state response of either repressing protestors or extending concessions was determined entirely at the local level. In another ten cases, provincial authorities intervened, leaving only five cases in which the central government became directly involved (Cai, 2008: 420).

Conclusions

These findings suggest that the variation in state centralization between Tunisia and Egypt, on the one hand, and China, on the other, helps explain why popular protests prompted authoritarian breakdown in the former, but have not affected the resilience of the regime in the latter. In all three cases discussed in this article, authoritarian regimes have demonstrated high levels of capacity: they have had powerful and effective coercive apparatuses, highly institutionalized hegemonic parties, and comparable levels of discretionary control over the economy. These factors led scholars to the conclusion that all three regimes were extraordinarily durable – an assessment that has since quickly fallen apart with the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak. Moreover, all three regimes have struggled with the problem of social instability, which was driven in no small part by high levels of corruption, inequality, and youth unemployment. While China has had a smaller cohort of

20-somethings than the cases of Egypt and Tunisia and higher rates of overall economic growth, this has not prevented the outbreak of frequent and intense outbursts of social unrest, which have expanded rapidly in number over the past several decades (Kahn, 2006).

While fragmented outbursts of social unrest transformed into protests coordinated and sustained on the national level in Egypt and Tunisia, protests in China have remained scattered and oriented around local and limited issues and targeted against subnational officials. The divergence on this outcome, that is, on the prevailing *mode* of protest (national contention in the Arab Spring cases and parochial contention in China), helps explain why the PRC has continued to endure and not faced nationwide protest movements despite the frequency of protest actions overall within its borders. These findings suggest that the literature on authoritarian resilience can be enhanced by asking not only if regimes are 'high' or 'low' capacity, but also how particular states' structures can impede or facilitate the appearance of national-level protest movements as autocratic regimes interact with popular claimants.

Note

1. This notion of middle-class discontent is also supported by a number of recent high-profile protest actions. These include ones against polluting chemical plants at Xiamen in 2007 and Dalian in 2011 that involved tens of thousands of protesters and the well-known protest against a proposed magnetic train line in Shanghai during 2008, which were overwhelmingly middle-class affairs.

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