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# Social Justice & Development Policy in the Arab World

May 2014

## Relative Deprivation and Politics in the Arab Uprisings

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*IFI Affiliated Scholar*

Research Report

Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs  
American University of Beirut

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**The Social Justice and Development Policy in the Arab World** research initiative is a jointly managed collaboration between the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice at Princeton University and the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. Social justice became one of the most prominent demands stemming out of the Arab uprisings. This initiative tries to further understand through research the many different meanings of the phrase “social justice” and its social, economic, and political policy implications.

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## Abstract

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This study seeks to assess the relative weights of economic and political grievances across the uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt, and Tunisia. Highlighting the unique shared role of middle class youth, it contends that these constituencies have suffered from relative deprivation, despite deliberate efforts by authoritarian regimes to shield them through new targeted social protection initiatives. Nonetheless, economic grievances were not always the primary driving dynamic of protests and the importance of the middle classes has varied compared to the roles of the poor, labor, and pro-democracy movements. Unlike Tunisia, the cases of Bahrain and Egypt exhibit higher influence of political grievances in triggering collective action at the initial stages. The hypothesis derived from the analysis is that splits among core elite groups are instrumental in politicizing middle class youth as well as creating space for their mobilization around demands for democratic change.

## About the Author

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Massive collective actions in the Middle East since late 2010 have been commonly viewed as a monolithic regional phenomenon rather than distinct socio-political events, with important differences as far as the role of various actors or internal mobilization dynamics. For some, the uprisings clearly belong to a rare class of historical events: “concatenation of political upheavals, one detonating the other, across an entire region of the world” (Anderson, 2011, p.5). Across ideological divides, many observers thus paint the uprisings as one “Arab revolution”. Not only is “the” revolution rooted in the same regional pattern of neo-patrimonial rule but also its regime change objective, peaceful strategies, as well as its youth-led non-ideological mobilization, render slight differences across countries insignificant. On these bases, one analyst boldly asserts: “There is no scope to conceptualize the Arab revolution except in singular terms” (Al Marzooqy, 2012, p.263).

Building on this meta-narrative, one of the most dominant explanations of the uprisings is that they were born out of socio-economic pressures emanating from the world economy. More specifically, rising global prices of major staples (including rice, corn, and wheat) are singled out as the major impetus for the revolts in the region. The World Bank’s food price index jumped 15% between October 2010 and January 2011 and the price of wheat, which the region heavily imports, doubled between March 2010 and February 2011 (World Bank, 2011). Successive fuel and fiscal crises may have differentially affected Middle Eastern states, but the world recession particularly affected workers remittances from Europe and the Gulf. As a result, the drivers of protests are rooted in the same set of economic challenges: increasing polarization of incomes, rising food prices, as well as high unemployment.

In this commonly held monolithic narrative of the Arab uprisings, shared popular mobilization patterns reflect the region’s unique demographic pyramid structure with an average 30% of its population in the 14-25 age bracket. The median age in the region is the second lowest in the world, with only Sub-Saharan African countries being younger (Springborg, 2011, p.86). Although broad segments of society seem to participate in the uprisings, like workers, pro-democracy movements, and the poor, ultimately those who ignited the revolution were the youth.

In order to explain mobilization of broad segments of society, the structural meta-narrative often echoes the much-criticized notion of the “Arab Street” (Bayat, 2003). Commentators, for instance, often draw on the “steam-boiler” analogy, linking price hikes with the occurrence of impulsive unorganized protests by angry ‘mobs.’ In this view, the widespread 2011 social unrest “does not arise from long-standing political failings of the system”, but rather from its sudden perceived failure to provide food security (Lagi, Bertrand, and Bar-Yam, 2011). Other analysts only tacitly recognize the role of actors by pointing to the influence of perceived violations of culturally defined socio-economic entitlements in stimulating the revolts. Here, collective mobilizations across the region mirror the food riots of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe, as defensive responses triggered by a profound moral sense of “being cheated” (Fraser and Ramis, 2011). As one author emphasizes, bread was a powerful cultural symbol in the 2011 uprisings; protestors crafted slogans that translated justice and democracy into the language of food: “They are eating pigeon and chicken,” they chanted, “and we are eating beans all the time” (Ciezdalo, 2011, p.233). Absent from this line of analysis are the roles of complex durable social networks and political organizations in collective protests. Political grievances as well, are an afterthought in this interpretation and for some are even marginal to grasping the Arab Spring phenomenon.

While not entirely dismissing the structural drivers emphasized by proponents of the meta-narrative, this contribution attempts to move beyond its general parameters of analysis. Recognizing the importance of market-based tensions, I seek to demonstrate that they cannot fully explain the 2011 uprisings in Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia. This is the case since many countries experienced similar, if not worse, economic conditions. Also, Egypt and Tunisia experienced protests and riots in 2007-2008, which coincided with a peak in world food prices (Ansani and Daniele, 2012, p.8), yet this did not translate into revolutionary mobilization as witnessed in 2010-2011. Similarly, the parallel youth bulge argument often used in meta-narratives of the Arab Spring, is empirically inaccurate given that the demographic peak of youth in the region actually passed and dependency ratios have started to decline (UNDP database).

Indeed, examining more closely the inner dynamics of protest in the three contexts reveals that the structural narrative falls short in several vital respects. Unlike food riots or earlier forms of collective resistance, the poor did partake in the protests but were not always its main driving force. Also, the narrative overlooks differences in the spark for mobilization, divergent inner dynamics of protest or variations in the roles and relative weights of social actors in the broad oppositional coalition underpinning the protests. Hence, it can neither account for distinct spatial mobilization patterns in the three cases, nor differences in ideological framing of protestors' across these cases.

In order to move beyond monolithic treatment of the Arab Spring and to develop an explanation rooted in the contextual political economies of the countries in question, the article engages with two sets of broad questions. How can we account for differences and similarities in the political economy of the protests across these cases? More specifically, in which cases did political grievances, rather than the economically rooted ones play a larger role in the mobilization? By retracing the course of events in the early cases of the protests, the article seeks to tease out the central causal political and economic links that led to the uprisings. Nonetheless, "elucidating these causal paths falls far short of bestowing the power of prediction in other cases because prediction assumes an element of determinism in these pathways that simply does not exist" (Bellin, 2012, p.128).

# I. Contrasting Inner Dynamics and Patterns of Mobilization

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Although a full analysis of the relative weight of the various actors is beyond the scope of this article, a cursory look at the uprisings reveals that they shared a vital distinguishing feature: *middle class participation*. Not only has the middle class long been considered politically docile, but also students of democratization highlight its pivotal role in triggering regime break down when it joins popular protests (Bratton and Van der Walle, 1994). The term 'middle class' is broadly used in reference to impoverished civil servants, public sector employees, and new segments that emerged in the 1990s. The latter encompass small merchants and industrialists that benefited from market reforms in addition to skilled professionals concentrated in large private sector companies (Diwan, 2012, p.6). Based on income distribution data, Ishac Diwan estimates that the size of middle classes in the region is around 30%.

The relative importance of the middle classes in Arab uprisings, however, differed depending on the context, and so did the roles played by the poor, labor and pro-democracy movements. In addition, spatial mobilization patterns of the three uprisings also varied significantly. The purpose of this section is to briefly sketch some of these variations in order to set the background for analyzing the relative weight of economic versus political grievances in spurring the uprisings in each case.

## Labor Movements

As far as the relative weight of various actors in the uprisings is concerned, several observations can be made. First, workers' participation significantly varied in the three countries. Although protests remained youth-led, unions called for general strikes at the peak of Bahrain's uprising. In Tunisia, workers' unions at the local level added momentum to the youth-led protests. Their initial participation through wildcat strikes at local chapters levels came despite the political loyalty of the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) leadership to the Ben Ali regime at early stages of the uprising. In contrast, organized labor was clearly less vital to the mobilization process in Egypt. The January 25<sup>th</sup> Revolution coincided with the formation of the first Independent Federation of Labor Unions in the nation's history, which had yet to develop mobilization capacity to play a proactive role. Unlike the other two cases, Egyptian labor post the uprisings has not been successful at extracting new concessions from the state (e.g. minimum wage legislation), but has maintained its hard won autonomy.

## Pro-democracy Movements

Pro-democracy movements in all three cases played a reactive role to the uprisings and their participation amounted to bandwagon effects. They, nonetheless, rapidly came to constitute a significant force in the Bahraini case. As protests escalated, they played a major role in the formulation of clear political demands: while the moderate opposition with al-Wifaq as its figurehead demanded a genuine constitutional monarchy, other smaller groups gathered to demand the establishment of a democratic republic. Egypt represented a middle ground case where *Kifaya* added political momentum to the youth-led uprising but neither provided it with leadership nor significantly broadened popular mobilization. Finally, in Tunisia, the October 8<sup>th</sup> coalition of opposition parties was the least effective at mobilizing or articulating protestor's demands.

## Urban vs. Rural Poor

A broad-based alliance between urban-based poor and their counterparts in rural or peripheral areas has played a more significant role in Bahrain and Tunisia than in Egypt. In the latter context, peasants and the urban poor neither initiated nor vitalized collective mobilizations. As a result, spatial patterns of mobilization varied significantly. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia was ignited in a semi-rural impoverished context and gradually spread to urban areas where middle class youth eventually managed to nationally coordinate protests. In contrast, Egypt's uprising was spread-out but confined to urban centers. Similarly, Bahraini protestors nationally coordinated mobilization efforts yet the uprising began in marginalized peripheral areas that witnessed first signs of collective action on February 14<sup>th</sup>.

## Geographies of the Uprisings

As the first Arab uprising, Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution had a unique pattern of mobilization. Protests actually started outside main urban areas and became nationally coordinated only at later stages of the mobilization cycle. Protests were initially localized in Sidi Bouzid town where unemployment affects over one third of residents (Gantin & Seddik, 2008). Tribal loyalties among town residents, who mostly work in agriculture, help explain the rapid spread of protests after Bouazizi's tragic death.

Sit-ins, strikes, and demonstrations rapidly spread to neighboring Kasserine, and eventually to Tunisia's poverty crescent (Le Kef, Manouba and Jendouba). The police deployed excessive violence to quell protests and lay siege to restive towns for as long as six days. As news of the siege in rural areas spread, the now middle class led-protests assumed a national scale. Protestors organized marches and demonstrations in the capital Tunis among other cities. They rallied urban poor and rural migrants residing in shanty-towns. Although the middle classes eventually led the uprising, the rural poor were the first to protest and their mobilization was crucial in exerting wider grassroots pressure on Ben Ali's regime (Gharbaly, 2013).

With Tahrir Square serving as its epicenter and symbol, the uprising in Egypt was predominantly urban. Initially, the poor did not play a major role in the uprising with the momentum for mobilization coming mostly from the middle classes. As a result, the peasants and to a lesser extent poor city dwellers were sidelined. Outside Cairo, protestors congregated in central squares like Mansheya in Alexandria. However, Suez city witnessed the death of the first protestor and emerged as the flashpoint of violent confrontations. Tensions were particularly high in Suez on the heels of heavy repression of workers' strike and a police officer's murder (Benin, 2011).

As for Bahrain, the February 14<sup>th</sup> uprising was coordinated across the Kingdom to commemorate the anniversary of the 2001 National Charter. Manama, where protestors replicated the Egyptian model by organizing a sit-in at Pearl Square, attracted worldwide attention. Nonetheless, the predominantly Shia peripheral areas outside the capital that share histories of marginalization were initially the hot spots of confrontation with the regime. In fact, on February 14<sup>th</sup> Nuwaidrat and the island of Sitra witnessed the first signs of major demonstrations (Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, 2011).

## II. Economic Contexts

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The three cases represent semi-rentier states that have pursued, to various degrees of success, industrialization, urbanization, and economic diversification strategies, while achieving relatively respectable development levels by regional standards. Egypt and Tunisia stood out in the region as top neoliberal reformers with economies rapidly growing at over 6 percent. Similarly, Bahrain is considered the first post-rentier economy among the Gulf states with official GDP growth rates estimates exceeding 10% (Central Bank of Bahrain, 2010). The three cases vary in terms of their human development levels. Bahrain is considered a country with “very high human development” while Tunisia and Egypt fall in the high and medium human development categories respectively. However, the three countries still performed above the Arab average of 0.65 on the Human Development Index (Bahrain=0.794, Egypt=0.661, and Tunisia=0.71) (UNDP). Growth rates and improved standards of living mask realities of growing inequality across socio-economic classes which contributed to popular perceptions of relative deprivation and undermined support among the middle classes for ruling regimes. Notwithstanding their differences, they all share important traits that are vital for grasping the dynamics that drove the uprisings: Organized labor movements, high unemployment rates (ranging from approximately 9% in Bahrain and Tunisia to 14% in Egypt), as well as significant, if contested, incidences of poverty.

Poverty estimates in the Arab world are scarce or unreliable due to artificially low official poverty lines and political sensitivity. In 2001, the World Bank estimated that “approximately 52 million people were poor, an increase in absolute numbers of approximately 11.5 million people, compared with the situation in 1987” (Iqbal and World Bank 2006). Most recently, using the extremely conservative estimate of \$1.25 a day Purchasing Power Parity (PPP), 2% of Egyptians and 2.6% of Tunisians were considered poor (Breisinger et al, 2012). Officially, absolute poverty is non-existent in Bahrain. Available MDG survey data reveal that 12.2% survive on less than \$5 a day in Bahrain, and a mere 2% are living on less than \$3 a day (UNDP, 2003). Using a relative poverty line defined as 50% of median income, or 463 Bahraini Dinar (BD) a month, 22% of Bahraini nationals were officially considered relatively poor in 2010 (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2011). Research on social assistance recipients similarly reveals that they typically not just own durable household goods (fridge, television, etc.), but also 93.5% of them own a vehicle and 22.1% own even more than one (Korayem, 2012).

Other measures of poverty paint a very different picture. On the eve of the revolution in Egypt in 2009-2010, official estimates indicated that 22% lived below the absolute poverty line, which is based on minimum food expenditure needs. That ratio doubled to nearly 40% at the national poverty line which takes into account basic needs beyond nutrition. In post-uprisings Bahrain and Tunisia, official estimates of poverty have been severely criticized. Tunisia’s widely acclaimed record at income poverty reduction has been called into question with officials revising poverty rates, based on the World Bank’s \$2 a day measure, from 4.3% to 25% of the population as of May 2011<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, critics in Bahrain allege that the regime systematically underestimates poverty particularly in rural areas and among fishermen communities highlighting a 2004 study by the Centre for Human Rights that put poverty rates at 25% of the population based on an income household threshold of BD 309 (BCHR, 2004).

Though to varying degrees, all three countries were affected by the fiscal, fuel, and food crises particularly during the recession years between 2008 and 2010. In Egypt and Tunisia, growth in GDP per capita PPP decelerated to 6.2% and 3.9% during the global recession years compared to a rate of growth of 10.4% and 9% during the 2005-2007 period (World Bank data from [globaleconomy.com](http://globaleconomy.com)). In Bahrain, however, the situation was direr with growth declining into negative levels at -10% during the recession years and -14% during the preceding three years. In fact, the country has experienced a reversal in earlier gains in real per capita GDP levels since 2004 (World Bank data from [globaleconomy.com](http://globaleconomy.com)).

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1 Based on the World Bank’s \$2 USD a day measure

Both Egypt and Tunisia were affected by declining demand for their exports, with a drop in real terms of 14% and 3% respectively (Ansani and Daniele, 2012). The collapse in oil prices in the summer of 2008 and early 2009 directly affected Bahrain's economy which registered negative growth levels. Egypt was indirectly affected by declining oil prices with workers' remittances falling from 5.34% of the GDP in 2008 to 3.53% in 2010. In contrast, Tunisia's access to income sent by its expat labor seems unscathed, with remittances actually slightly rising from 4.41% to 4.45% over the same period (UNDP).

Nonetheless, the negative effects of the downturn in the global economy need to be kept in perspective. If compared to the experiences of European countries, such as France, Spain or Italy, the overall impact of the recession on growth and the real economy has not been as severe in the region (Ansani and Daniele, 2012). Egypt and Tunisia, less so Bahrain, were not as heavily integrated into the global economy, as advanced countries. As highlighted by Ansani and Daniele, despite economic diversification efforts in North African countries, "production in these countries is mainly in low value-added sectors: Cereals, foodstuffs, textiles, cement, machinery and transport equipment" (5). Thus, the nature of their exports seems to have relatively shielded them.

In fact, looking closely at the three uprisings, it is clear that the motivations behind their occurrence cannot be simply reduced to systemic economic pressures. Despite the prevalence of significant poverty in the three countries, the rural and urban poor did not lead the uprisings. All three authoritarian regimes have officially maintained their social contract institutions, and even launched new social protection initiatives in recent years to primarily preserve the interests of the middle classes and to a lesser extent the poor. Consequently, by 2010 they had accumulated relatively high public debt to GDP ratios ranging from 32% in Bahrain, 45.7% in Tunisia, to 85.7% in Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

In Egypt and Tunisia, since the 1990s following the selective implementation of market oriented policies, welfare regimes retrenched with per-capita social expenditures sharply declining as a percentage of the GDP relative to the early 1980s and only partially recovered in the new millennium. In 1982, social expenditure in Egypt and Tunisia amounted to 34% and 22% of the GDP respectively. Those numbers declined in the 1990s to reach 20% and 14% in the 1990s, and continued to range between 16% and 17% in the first half of the 2000s (El-Meehy 14). In response to the economic slow-down, both countries raised their social spending levels and extended population coverage to more households (e.g. ration card subsidy system in Egypt), in addition to even launching new ones (e.g. new cash transfer program in Egypt and health insurance scheme in Tunisia), in order to pre-empt potential social unrest. Indeed, the implementation of structural adjustment reforms did not coincide with the overhaul of welfare institutions or the introduction of targeted cash support for the poor. Food subsidy systems remained officially in place and universally accessible but fewer and lower quality items were now covered. Egypt's universally subsidized baladi bread notoriously deteriorated in both size and quality, but the regime committed itself to its "social pricing." Employment-based pension systems that generously benefit the middle classes on fixed-benefits bases were preserved with coverage impressively exceeding 40% of the labor force in Tunisia and over 60% in Egypt (Ibid). Growing segments of the informal and rural sectors were further incorporated under the employment-based insurance-based systems.

In the case of Bahrain, despite limited oil reserves and increasing dependence on budget support from the GCC, the government has traditionally maintained subsidies for essential foodstuffs. These were expected to rise from BD 88.9 million, representing approximately 1.1% of the country's GDP in 2009-2010 to almost BD 133 million, or 1.6% of the GDP in 2011 and 2012.<sup>3</sup> After the financial crisis of 2008 and unrest over the price of gas, Bahrain raised subsidies; a step that primarily benefits the middle classes. Pension reforms were implemented with ILO consultation in the mid-2000s, and entailed the introduction of a two tiers unemployment insurance system. In a departure from the mainstream differential fixed-benefit social security, a first tier of unemployment compensation covers workers in

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2 Calculated by the author from EIU

3 Figures calculated from IMF World Economic Outlook 2010 and Habib Toumi, "Bahrain Announces measures to help needy families" Gulf News February 3, 2011.

both public and private sectors, including foreigners who fulfill a minimum contributions period (El-Meehy, 2011)<sup>4</sup>. Nonetheless, small businesses with less than five employees are not officially covered by the scheme, thereby de facto excluding Bahrain's predominantly Shia working poor from unemployment benefits. The second tier of the new insurance system is one of the few flat rate unemployment aid programs for first-time job seekers in the region. Unlike the compensation tier, the scheme is only accessible by Bahraini citizens, and officially requires participation in training, job matching, and career guidance programs. This scheme has rapidly expanded since its introduction, such that by late 2009, 87% of the grand total of beneficiaries under the two tiered new insurance system were recipients of unemployment aid (El-Meehy, 2011). The middle classes were clearly represented among the scheme's beneficiaries, almost half of whom held university degrees.

The middle classes in Bahrain, Egypt, and Tunisia constitute the primary beneficiaries of social protection schemes. As observed above, welfare reforms served to nominally preserve or extend new social rights to citizens in the face of mounting economic pressures. These new rights were, however, largely inaccessible by the Shia poor in Bahrain and in the cases of Egypt and Tunisia often coincided with reductions in net transfers to the poor. In the absence of effective income tax systems, Egypt and Tunisia have progressively relied since the 1990s on introducing indirect taxes on goods and services, such as the Value Added Taxes (VAT). By the mid-2000s, levels of indirect taxation, which typically disproportionately affect the lower classes, significantly outpaced social spending in both countries, thereby rendering welfare regimes overall less redistributive.

In sum, all three regimes, to varying degrees, attempted to cushion the impact of structural economic pressures on the middle classes through restructuring their welfare regimes to their benefit. Despite significant poverty, those most negatively affected by economic crises in recent years did not always initiate or lead the revolts. Why did middle class youth, whom all three regimes carefully avoided alienating, participate in Arab uprisings?

### III. Relative Deprivation and Young Middle Class Protestors

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As aptly put by one observer, "what lies beneath the so called "Jasmine Revolution" is the growing intolerance towards inequality between regions, social classes, and generations" (Hermassi, 2013, p.80). Two inter-linked tensions rooted in the operation of markets seem to have contributed to the leading role assumed by middle class youth in the course of the Arab uprisings: growing relative deprivation and high unemployment levels. Yet, even economic trends elucidated in this section cannot adequately explain the revolt without analytically incorporating the role of political dynamics in triggering protests. As discussed in Section IV, contextual factors hold the key to understanding the revolts in Bahrain, Egypt, and Tunisia.

Officially the three countries are not among the hardest hit with inflation, which ranged from 4% in Bahrain and Tunisia to 13% in Egypt (IMF, 2010). Using the Consumer Price Index (CPI) to trace inflation during the recession years between 2008 and 2010 reveals a more nuanced picture. The index sharply rose by over 24% in Egypt from 139 to 173, while in Tunisia it increased mildly from 113 to 123, and Bahrain witnessed a slight upward change from 109 to 115 (calculated by author from UNDP database). These figures indicate that Bahrain and Tunisia's inflation levels are not severely bad compared to the experience of other countries, like South Africa whose CPI rose from 125 to 140, or Mexico which witnessed a rise from 113 to 124 over the same period. Egypt's level of inflation, while high relative to other countries, is consistent with its own record in the 1980s and 1990s during which inflation was as high as 25% (Ansani and Daniele, 2012, p.7). In other words, rising prices cannot fully explain the outbreak of protests. Rising prices, however, in 2010 arguably contributed to growing perceptions of relative

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4 This plan is co-financed by equal shares from government, employees and employers (each party contributes 1% of salaries), and replaces 60% of the average wage during the last 12 months of employment up to a maximum of BD 500 for six months.

deprivation among the middle classes.

The role of the middle classes in driving the Arab uprisings has emerged as the focus of a new body of literature on the region (Diwan 2012, Kandil 2012). Despite the relative neglect of class as a category in political economy analyses of the region, scholars are increasingly recognizing its utility for capturing the underlying dynamics of revolutionary change. The core thesis of these new studies is that under the etatist model of development of the 1950s and 1960s, Arab states traditionally incorporated the middle classes as vital segments of its social bases of power. Under the 'social contract', these classes were singled out not just as beneficiaries of land reforms, but also additional re-distributional measures like free education, guaranteed public employment for graduates, and eventually special privileges as members of a unique class of "state bourgeoisie." In exchange, an authoritarian bargain was struck whereby these constituencies were not to demand participation in policymaking. The adoption of market-oriented reforms by states following accumulation crises gave way to crony capitalism and higher inequality. In the words of Ishac Diwan, "this regime (sic of crony capitalism) is perceived to have generated unacceptable inequalities, directly by supporting the growth of a class of super-rich, and indirectly by being unable to create sufficient good jobs for the newly educated middle classes" (5).

While the middle classes continued to have access to the state's largesse, these constituencies experienced growing relative deprivation in the three contexts. Perceptions of well-being are often tied to *relative income* and *relative consumption* of particular goods rather than absolute per capita income levels, which reached \$20,000 USD in Bahrain versus, \$2070 USD in Egypt and \$3720 USD in Tunisia in 2010. The Gini coefficient – a standardized widely used measure of inequality – in Tunisia rose slightly from 0.39 to 0.40 while that of Egypt remained officially constant at 0.34 over the last decade. Compared to other emerging markets, like China, Brazil, Turkey and South Africa, Egypt and Tunisia seemed to fare relatively well in terms of class disparities.<sup>5</sup>

In Bahrain, available statistics from 2003 show that the share of the poorest 20% in total income was 9.3% compared to 41.6% owned by the richest 20% (UNDP 2003, 4). Similar data on Egypt from 2008 and Tunisia from 2010 reveal that levels of inequality are roughly similar. Indeed, Egypt's and Tunisia's poorest 20% had 9.2% and 6.7% shares of total incomes. As for the top 20%, their income levels represented 40.3% in Egypt and 42.9% in Tunisia (World Bank database). Recent data on Bahrain is unavailable, but with a shrinking economy since 2004 inequality may have worsened. By relative standards, inequality levels in the three instances are not unique. On the eve of the uprisings, inequality actually seems to have slightly improved in Egypt and Tunisia. In 2000, the richest 20% had 42.1% of Egypt's national income and 47.3% of Tunisia's national income, while the poorest 20% accounted for 9% and 6% respectively (World Bank database). However, unreliable data and conceptual problems render the use of Gini coefficient measures or income distribution patterns to capture relative deprivation misleading. The real question we confront is whether middle class protestors compared themselves to others in their age group, their fellow Arabs, or to global lifestyles?

In general, subjective perceptions of well-being in the region are low. In fact, recent research highlights that Egypt has the highest number of people dissatisfied with their standards of living (22.8 million) or roughly 28.5% of the population versus 21% in Tunisia and an alarming 38% in Bahrain (Breisinger et al, 2011). New research on the economics of happiness in developing contexts offers clues about constituencies more likely to be dissatisfied. It indicates that those who are just above the poverty line (i.e. lower middle class groups) tend to systematically have higher perceptions of vulnerability and deprivation as well as lower sense of welfare compared to the poor (Graham, 2005). Although we lack similar data on the Middle East, income distribution patterns show that large segments of the populations in Egypt and Tunisia live just above poverty lines. Further, there are several empirical trends that highlight deepening relative deprivation among the middle classes in recent years. Access to middle class status was primarily "through government employment" (Springborg, 2011, p.87). Although its share of total employment remains large, hiring in the public sector has slowed down especially in Egypt and Tunisia. Thanks to rigid labor market structures and social insurance policies; however, public employment remained the preference of middle class university graduates who prioritize job security, social status, and possibility for moonlighting.

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<sup>5</sup> Based on comparisons of Gini coefficients from World Bank <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>

Declining real wages in this sector became the rallying cry of the middle classes. This is particularly the case in Egypt and Tunisia as growing segments of government employees “receive remuneration that does not provide them the economic security which is the *sine qua non* of middle-class status” (Springborg, 2011, p.87). While the problem is less severe for tribal Sunnis in Bahrain who are concentrated in the government and defense sectors, the bulk of the population are employed in micro or small businesses that lack job security and create irregular, low pay. As for large private companies, they have been contributing to the problem by creating “bimodal” labor markets; heavily concentrated at the top or the very bottom of the skill level and income scale (Springborg, 2011, p. 88). Declining emphases on manufacturing (or the systematic hiring of expats in this sector in Bahrain), and booming tertiary economic activities, rendered middle level employment outside the state both modest and accounting for a meager share of wages.

As a result, large-scale campaigns for adequate minimum wage legislation were waged in recent years by new social movements, the opposition, as well as trade unions. While foreign-linked elements of the bourgeoisie, neoliberal minded technocrats, as well as upper segments of the middle classes (with marketable skills in the booming information technology, financial and tourism sectors) were prospering and came to constitute a new dominant social coalition, large segments of society were left behind.

On the consumption side, young middle class constituencies have also been experiencing growing relative deprivation. While shopping malls became the new urban centers in Cairo, the middle classes were relegated to “virtual” consumption in these new “global” spaces (El-Meehy, 2011). As the rich moved to new-gated communities, the city’s *ashwaeyat* or shantytowns now included middle class families that could not afford housing elsewhere. Official statistics from Tunisia show that private debt has increased rapidly as middle class families struggled to maintain their standards of living in the face of rising prices. Between 2003 and 2008, the number of citizens who relied on personal loans to finance household goods (houses, cars, or furniture) jumped from 50 thousand to 800 thousand (Abdelnoor, 2012, p.159).

In Bahrain, the urban-based middle class has been feeling squeezed increasingly in terms of access to basic services, particularly affordable housing. The wait time for subsidized housing has reached twenty-five years. The problem in part stems from sand dredging practices whereby Bahrain’s size has increased by over 3% during just the five years period between 2001-2006, and its size is estimated to have multiplied 76.3% since 1931 (Kotb, 2011, p.264). The process entails the conversion of public “reclaimed land” to the ruling family’s private ownership in the absence of transparent regulatory legal frameworks. Much of these lands are then classified as real estate investment projects for private use or luxury housing for wealthy foreigners. For the urban middle classes, this consumption pattern is beyond their means and exemplifies growing corruption within the ruling family.

For Bahraini, Egyptian and Tunisian youth, the problem of relative deprivation is particularly pronounced because of the higher incidence of unemployment among them. Unemployment among youth (15-29 years old), who account for 29 percent of the population in Egypt and Tunisia, is arguably another source of economic grievances. Adoption of neoliberal development models was associated with jobless growth, rising de-proletariatization, and in the case of Bahrain fierce competition by migrant workers. Overall unemployment was estimated at 15% in Tunisia prior to the uprising but was double that figure among youth. For both Bahrain and Egypt, unemployment was around 10% prior to the uprisings, but reached at least 25% among youth (IMF 2011 and World Bank database).

University graduates remain the most affected sub-group. In Tunisia, it takes on average 28 months for a recent graduate to land his first job while in Egypt the period is 24 months (Stampini 2011; Assaad 2007). Recent data suggests that the odds of landing a job in Tunisia within the first year and a half of graduation were as low as 54% (World Bank), while an estimated 66% of the unemployed in Egypt never held a job before (CAPMAS 2011 cited in Feteha 2011). In Bahrain, long-term unemployment is estimated to affect 30.4% of the population. Although specific data on youth unemployment is scarce, there are signs that the problem is particularly pronounced. In fact, university graduates have been vocal in highlighting their struggle to find jobs in recent years. For instance, since 2009 a social movement by Bahraini unemployed youth has emerged—represented by “committee for the unemployed,” “committee to support unemployed female graduates,” and “association of university alumni.” The movement, which

was violently repressed, organized marches and protests actions for the unemployed under the slogan “loaf of bread” in front of the Royal Diwan and the Ministry of Labor (Kotb, 2011, p. 279).

The inability of the private sector to create employment opportunities and the slowing of public sector employment, led both Egypt and Tunisia to promote Micro-Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) as a solution to rising unemployment. However, the agencies entrusted with the extension of subsidized credit for small entrepreneurs and the development of this sector of the economy were ineffective. In particular, Egypt’s Social Fund for Development and Tunisia’s National Solidarity Fund were closely tied to the ruling regimes’ patronage networks, and studies indicate that their targeted allocations were politicized. Although Tunisia’s record is considered relatively more successful, in neither cases the MSME sectors became vibrant engines of economic growth, with modest contributions to manufacturing value added, high closure rates, and limited numbers of jobs created (El-Meehy, 2011). According to one study, rates of entrepreneurial activity – or percentages of adult population who are trying to establish a business, have established a startup, or own an existing business – are a mere 13.1% and 9.4% in Egypt and Tunisia respectively (Stevenson, 2010).

As discussed in the previous section, the Kingdom of Bahrain initiated a series of programs designed to provide support in landing jobs, training, as well as financially assisting first time labor entrants. In addition, it embarked on a controversial Bahrain-ization policy, resisted by the private sector. The policy entailed establishing a new Labor Regulation Authority with the official mandate to “handle the transfer of expatriate workers from one sponsor to another as well as the renewal of their sponsorship and termination processes” with the explicit goal of substituting expat workers with comparably qualified Bahraini counterparts (Al Baik, 2007). Further, public employment in Bahrain grew during the oil boom years with “the state offering their nationals work in government offices or government-owned entities, often with salaries twice those that the private sector paid for jobs at similar skill levels” (Boer and Turner, 2007, p.12). Nonetheless, these efforts did not resolve the problem of youth unemployment in Bahrain. Training programs have been less than effective, partially because the private sector has continued to resist Bahrain-ization policies, preferring instead to hire lower waged migrant labors. Aside from the exclusion of many citizens from state employment, Bahrain’s limited revenues from oil, and increasing dependence on its neighbors to sustain the public budget, have also rendered public employment an unsustainable policy response.

## IV. Political Sparks of the Uprisings

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In order to analytically unpack why relative deprivation among the middle class youth led to the massive mobilizations of 2010-2011, this section explores the impact of prevailing political contexts in the three countries. Contextual factors hold the key to understanding patterns of similarity and difference across them particularly in terms of the relative weight of economic versus politically rooted grievances. We find that mobilizations were initially started in opposition to particular forms of state violence as well as arbitrary state practices. They carried explicitly normative claims to inclusive democratic citizenship that embodies rights in the civic, social, and economic spheres. A closer look at evolution of protestors’ demands reveals an important distinction among the cases examined.

Egypt’s protests were sparked by Khaled Saeed’s violent death on the hands of the police at an internet café. As pictures of the young upper-middle class businessman surfaced on Facebook pages, details of police brutality outraged the public opinion. A few days after the incident, a series of marches, human chains, and protests by middle class youths were organized in order to bring the perpetrators to justice. Protection of basic human rights for citizens constituted the rallying cry for organizers who circulated evidence of torture in police stations across the country. The rationale for protesting on January 25<sup>th</sup>, the country’s official day for police celebration, was political: shaming Egypt’s police state.

“Freedom and human dignity” was the initial rallying cry for the protestors who focused their rage on rejecting arbitrary deployment of violence by the despised police force. The slogans most widely used in the early days of the uprising were: “We are all Khaled Said”, and “Raise your head high you are an Egyptian.” Socio-economic demands

were also articulated as participants escalated their demands chanting “Bread, Freedom and Social Justice” during the stalemate with the regime. The ideological framing of the uprising, in other words, evolved from political grievances surrounding respect for basic human rights to eventually encompass economic demands.

In Tunisia, the self-immolation of a young street peddler, Mohamed Bouazzizi, whose desperate act came in reaction to being beaten by a police officer and the confiscation of his goods initially spurred a local revolt in Sidi Bouzid around *economic* grievances. More specifically, predominantly the rural poor galvanized the uprising around issues of unemployment and high prices. The primacy of socioeconomic demands was in fact most evident in the Tunisian context, where poverty is heavily regionalized. For instance, the first slogans raised by the protestors were: “Employment is a Right Gang of Robbers!”, and in reference to the ex-first lady “Laila the Hairdresser You Have Stolen the Orphans’ Money.” Following repressive government responses against residents of Sidi Bouzid, the protests transformed into a political movement demanding civil rights and the ouster of Ben Ali. Collective mobilization thus spread to other parts of the country and climaxed with a demonstration in front of the Ministry of Interior in the capital.

As different as the cases of Khaled Saeed and Bouazizi are, they both reflect the middle class youth’s rejection of a particular form of state violence. States routinely employ concentrated violence and strong states approximate Max Weber’s ideal of monopolizing the legitimate exercise of force in society. While everyday life under the authoritarian regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak entailed heavy restrictions on civil and political rights, encounters with the state were for the most part predictable with the authorities representing the only source of legitimate protection for the citizenry (El-Meehy, 2011). Incidents that sparked uprisings though represented a different kind of violence employed by the state, what Charles Tilly labeled “racketeer government” whereby the state seemed to intermittently become the source of threat to people’s security, rather than the entity responsible for their protection (Tilly, 1985). The unpredictability of state violence and the fact that many saw themselves randomly becoming its victims prompted middle class mobilization.

In Bahrain, almost 300 activists were detained on vague terrorism charges prior to the late 2010 elections, including radicalized ex-members of Shia al Wifaq political party. Whereas this step may have played a role in raising tensions it did not necessarily spark mobilizations, which at inception were non-sectarian in character. The uprising’s timing on the anniversary of the 2001 National Action Charter was designed to highlight the regime’s backsliding on promised political liberalization steps. The impetus for the uprising was mainly politically rooted in the growing polarization of society along sectarian lines. Regime policies had served to accentuate the Sunni-Shia cleavage while simultaneously alienating major segments of both groups. Protestors rallied around demands for political reforms. More specifically, the square was viewed as a space for airing grievances surrounding corruption, inadequate public services, and electoral gerrymandering (Dickinson, 2012). At the core of the uprising’s ideological framing were demands for greater political participation, accountability and equal citizenship rights.

## V. Finding the Balance: Economic versus Political Grievances

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Despite sharing similar economic pressures, the above analysis shows that political demands played a less profound role in spurring the uprising in Tunisia compared to Bahrain and Egypt. This contribution suggests that the answer to this puzzle lies in specific aspects of the prevailing political structure that are known to shape emergence of social protest movements as well as their ultimate impact. Political structures refer not only to relatively stable institutions and traditions but also more dynamic aspects of opportunity, such as public policy, and elite alignment (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1996). I contend that the presence or lack of splits among core members of the elite influences the relative weight of political grievances among protestors. Where there were splits within elite ranks, uprisings were more likely to reflect political tensions and protestors demands were more likely to be framed in political terms. Although elite factions did not lead the revolts, divisions among elites opened space for greater politicization of the citizenry and were instrumental in politically driven mobilization in opposition to ruling regimes.

This dynamic has been largely absent in the case of Ben Ali's Tunisia. The ex-ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally party boasted two million members within a country of just over ten million people (Murphy, 2001, p.299). Nonetheless, "throughout the 1990s both power and patronage moved increasingly away from the party and into the hands of the government and the president" (Willis, 2012, p.133). The gradual concentration of power in the hands of Ben Ali and his immediate family, as well as his effective coercive state apparatus left little room for dissent within the ex-ruling DCR or among co-opted opposition members. Far from being part of Tunisia's core elite, the military was systematically marginalized under Ben Ali yet there is no evidence that this trend in particular galvanized political grievances among young middle class Tunisians or constituted a trigger for their mobilization.

In contrast, Egypt witnessed a growing rift among core elite groups over the orientation of its development policies, as well as the question of succession. By the late 1980s, accumulation crises opened space for actors within and outside the regime to selectively promote market-oriented policies, thereby instigating a gradual "paradigm" shift in economic policymaking. These actors included technocrats with extensive links to "transnational epistemic communities," (Hall, 1993, p.123) export-oriented and foreign-linked business magnates in the industrial, services, and mining sectors, politicians committed to an open market economy, as well as large landowners.

By the early 2000s, neoliberal development ideas coalesced into a focal point for the political rise of the "New Thinking" group within the ex-ruling National Democratic Party under the tutelage of Gamal Mubarak. The younger Mubarak was initially appointed to the NDP's governing body (the 25 member General Secretary) in February 2000. Two years later, he became the third ranking official in NDP as well as the chair of the newly created Policies Secretariat that quickly concentrated policy-making powers in the party (Rutherford, 2008, p.219). As the "New Thinking" group garnered power, Egypt witnessed the issuing of a new labor code and the emergence of "change teams" under successive Nazif governments resulting in revitalization of the privatization program and increased reliance on FDI inflows since 2004.

Within the party, the "New Thinking" group engaged in conflicts with three other factions: Safwat Al Sharif, who has been long supported by President Mubarak, Al Shazli's group that normally includes the Minister of Interior and *nouveaux riches* segments, and Youssef Wali, whose extensive patronage networks incorporate peasants and provincial businessmen. "Old guard" factions traditionally conflicted among themselves over electoral laws, parliamentary elections, and the position of party secretary general. Nonetheless, they collectively opposed the "New Thinking" group. In contrast to the latter, the "old guards" supported statist import substitution-based distributional policies benefiting broader segments of society. Their political coalition broadly encompassed vital constituencies within the NDP—including middle classes, rich peasants, organized labor, in addition to Sadat era provincial businessmen

and “regime neo-mercantilists” of the 1980s (Arafat, 2009). They were vocally critical of market reforms, Nazif-led “businessmen” cabinets, as well as father to son succession.

Power struggles intensified in recent years particularly over procedures for selecting NDP candidates, as well as parliamentary list changes (Arafat, 2009, p.57). In 2005, as Gamal Mubarak sought to recruit youth in order to cement support within the NDP, opposing factions fought back by siding with candidates that did not receive the official party nomination. Eventually, Gamal was successful at consolidating his grip over power by purging almost all elements of the old guard from the party and the cabinet, as well as appointing newcomers to the Party Secretariat.

On the eve of the uprising, Gamal Mubarak had become second secretary general of the party. The Policies Committee centrally managed the nomination process. Vote rigging, prevention of ballot casting, and heavy state manipulation were reported on a massive scale. The result was a parliament lacking any representation by the opposition. This was widely viewed as a clear U-turn compared to the 2005 parliament which included 88 seats for representatives of the Muslim Brothers. For many, these tactics were laying the groundwork to ensure a smooth succession from father to son during the 2011 presidential election. Not only did the country’s opposition denounce the succession plan, but also many factions within the core elite (i.e. NDP, state bureaucracy and military) did not support Gamal’s assumption of power (Shehata, 2011, p.143).

In Bahrain, the accession of King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa in 1999 and his selective economic liberalization measures triggered a struggle within the ranks of the ruling dynasty over both the country’s future economic orientation as well as the “acceptable” margin of political inclusion. Aside from loyal Sunni tribes, the ruling family traditionally drew support from the urban-based merchant class, which encompasses both Sunni and Shia elements. With a majority Shia population and a Sunni regime in power, the elite have over the years resorted to repression rather than accommodation of popular demands in order to preserve power.

The current monarch emerged on the political scene as a reformer having witnessed his father’s failed strategy of violently putting down a Shia-led rebellion during the late 1990s. King Hamad did not only promise an end to state coercion, but also officially inaugurated a new political era. Through controlled liberalization of the political arena, allowing return of dissidents, and reinstating parliament, the King attempted to absorb widespread discontent among regime opponents and to cement greater loyalty among Shia Bahrainis. Additionally, a second pillar of the reform process centered on economic restructuring aimed at diversifying the country’s sources of income, promoting private sector-led growth, and improving living conditions of citizens. As part of consolidating his hold on power, the King also sought to improve the standing of his son who was entrusted with putting the reforms into practice. By 2011, the Crown Prince gained popularity abroad and among the moderate opposition as “the rising figure within the dynasty; young, western-educated and liberal-minded” (Louer, 2013).

Prior to the uprising, Bahrain witnessed a heightening struggle between the Crown Prince and his pro-reform supporters, on the one hand, and the Prime Minister as well as his conservative allies, on the other. Prince Salman’s rising power has been at the expense of his great-uncle and the country’s only Prime Minister since independence Sh. Khalifa, who represents the “dynasty’s old guard” (Louer, 2013) and is a powerful proponent of the status quo. Aside from his patronage networks among prominent Sunni and Shia businessmen, Sh. Khalifa capitalizes on support among junior members of the ruling family “willing to accept material benefit for political deference” (Gengler, 2013, p.9). Indeed, the old guard camp has successfully resisted the King’s political and economic reform agendas. The 2002 constitution is widely criticized for the limited powers held by the directly elected assembly vis-à-vis the government, as well as failing to set the grounds for establishing a constitutional monarchy. Laws were enacted limiting public freedoms, restricting the right to protest, as well as restricting the activities of civil society. Most damaging for the future of Bahrain’s liberalization experiment, even the limited formal powers and independence of the directly elected legislative chamber were progressively undermined (Fakhour, 2012). Through a combination of gerrymandering and controversial naturalization policies of migrant Sunnis, the regime as well diluted the political influence of the Shia who represent an estimated 53% to 62% of the total citizen population. Consequently, in both the 2006 and 2010

election, al-Wifaq - the country's mainstream Shia movement- chose to field candidates in only 18 of 40 districts "out of recognition that it could not hope to carry the other, Sunni dominated regions" (Toumi 2011 cited in Gengler, 2013 p.11). These steps have reinforced Shia citizens' political exclusion instead of building bridges between them and the regime as originally intended by the King's rapprochement.

In the economic sphere, intra-ruling family struggles led to selective implementation, and even reversals, of market-oriented reform initiatives. The Crown Prince's signature labor market reforms entailed the introduction of a tax on foreign workers in order to create incentives for private firms to hire Bahraini citizens. Widely opposed by private sector employers, the new tax implementation was suspended by the prime minister. Resistance to Sh. Salman's economic agenda is also driven by geo-political considerations. By seeking to reduce Bahrain's heavy dependence on oil and gas provided by Saudi Arabia, and promoting economic activity in the tourism and banking sectors reformers have antagonized members of the old guard who continue to derive personal gains from close relations between the two countries. Perhaps most directly threatening to the old guard interests and their patronage networks was the reformers anti-corruption campaign that sought to streamline the public budget by limiting side payments to clients (Gengler, 2013, p.5). In fact, an investigation in 2007 led to removal of Sh. Khalifa's son from office as head of the department of Civil Aviation (Gengler, 2013, p.6).

One of the major by-products of the ongoing struggle within the reigning dynasty is the increasing polarization of society along sectarian lines. Apart from materialistic interests at stake, at the core of this struggle is an increasingly "open conflict over the very character of the state itself: its history and cultural identity; the basis of citizenship; and the conditions for inclusion in public service" (Gengler, 2013, p.12). Although the reformers' campaign raised popular expectations among the Shia population, their failure to deliver both on the political and economic fronts led to their further radicalization and splits in the al-Wifaq movement on the eve of the 2010 elections. As for the Sunni population, disillusionment with the economic reform agenda that hurt its private sector interests relatively alienated it from power-holders. With heightening of regional tensions and sectarian divisions in Iraq, Sunni citizens also became increasingly skeptical of attempts to cultivate political support among Shia Bahrainis (Gengler, 2013). Both segments of society have become increasingly politicized as a result of the ongoing struggle at the helm of the state as the two power centers failingly competed to dominate the political scene and cement a coherent social basis of power. Although the politicization effects played out along sectarian lines in Bahrain, there are signs that in fact the uprising was in the initial stages inclusive of both groups, and that the split at the top was conducive to the primacy of political demands.

## VI. Conclusion

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Contextual analysis of the Arab uprisings reveal that grievances rooted in the operation of markets may not always be strictly separated from political ones, particularly in the case of Bahrain. Nonetheless, the above analysis demonstrates that we can conceptually distinguish between uprisings in which economic grievances carried more weight in triggering mobilizations, and those predominantly brought about by political demands. In Tunisia, jobs and impoverishment of neglected areas beyond the coastline were the rallying cry for the uprising and created its momentum. Collective mobilization progressively assumed a political tone only when middle class youth saw Bou-Azizi's tragic death as an incident of racketeer governance and called for political reforms. In Egypt and Bahrain, the uprisings were originally spurred by political grievances, although here too economic demands were voiced in later stages of the revolts. I have argued that the distinguishing causal dynamic at play in the latter two cases were splits within the ranks of core elite groups that opened space for the politicization of middle class youths and their demands. Elite factions were alienated around succession and economic policy orientation in Egypt. In Bahrain, there was a parallel split within the ranks of the ruling dynasty over the economic reform agenda as well as the degree of political accommodation with the opposition as a regime survival strategy. The tentative hypothesis derived from this comparative analysis of the three cases, is that political grievances are likely to play a larger role in instigating uprisings where elite splits are present that create the space for greater politicization among citizenry.

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