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The significance of uniting different social classes in non-violent protests: A comparative analysis of the 1989 Tian'anmen square protest and the 2011 Egyptian revolution

Tianqi YinDOI: <https://doi.org/10.22271/27069109.2022.v4.i1b.130>**Abstract**

The 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution are two of the most influential non-violent protests at the junction of the 20th century and 21st century. Although they share many similarities, the two movements reached completely different results: the Tian'anmen Protest was harshly repressed by the Chinese government, whereas the Egyptian Revolution successfully overthrew the authoritarian Mubarak government. Although most existing research has attributed the different destinies of the two revolutionary movements to government control over the military, this paper focuses instead on the implications of the protestors' social classes. The research method employed is a qualitative comparative analysis on these two events based on existing literature and primary sources. Two objectives were formulated for this study: to examine how the social class composition of the protest movements influenced the development process of the two revolutions and to provide insights for future non-violent revolutionaries on how to avoid failure due to a lack of diversity in social classes among protesters.

Keywords: Non-violent protest, 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest, 2011 Egyptian Revolution, social class, protestor

1. Introduction

Between the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, two influential non-violent protests unfolded in developing countries, the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest and the 2011 Arab Spring, with both aiming to overthrow highly authoritative governments and rebuild more democratic ones. Although the two movements shared multiple similarities, the eventual result was completely different: the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest was harshly repressed by the government and ultimately failed, whereas the 2011 Arab Spring achieved success.

The most influential explanation for this discrepancy focuses on government control of military power. Indeed, according to research by the American Enterprise Institute's China Study Department, in the case of the Tian'anmen Square Protest, Deng Xiaoping, the head governor that successfully eliminated the protests, held full control over military power. Beyond his political positions in the Communist Party, Deng Xiaoping was also the Chairman of the Military Commission at the time ^[1]. In contrast, in the case of the Egyptian Revolution, according to Amy Austin Holmes, an International Affairs Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations specializing in social changes in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, the leader of the Egyptian government at that time, did not hold full control over the power of the Egyptian military ^[2]. James Gulliksen, a researcher at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University focusing on security and intelligence studies, concluded in his analysis of failed non-violent protests that because of the Chinese government's strict control over military power, "even [Martin Luther] King or Gandhi ^[3] would have failed in Beijing in 1989 ^[4]."

Meanwhile, factors beyond government control over military power are often overlooked. Su Xiaokang, a former lecturer at the Beijing Broadcast Company and protestor at Tian'anmen Square who was exiled to Europe, argued in a speech that "The failure of the [Tian'anmen Square] demonstrations should not only be blamed on the cruelty of the military oppression of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) ^[5]."

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This paper argues that the social class composition of protestors plays a central role in deciding the final outcome of non-violent protests. To make this argument, the paper presents a comparative analysis between the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, which is one of the most famous sub-revolutions of the 2011 Arab Spring [6].

2. Background

2.1 History of Non-violent Protests

Protesting has long been one of the most common methods employed during revolutions, and non-violent protest is one of the most popular forms of protest. According to David Hardiman, a distinguished professor at the University of Warwick specializing in subaltern studies and South Asia History, the idea of non-violent protest was first proposed and employed by one of the most influential anti-colonial nationalists, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, in his resistance against the British government [7]. Inspired by Gandhi's approach, Martin Luther King Jr., one of the most famous civil rights activists in the United States, adopted the notion of non-violence into civil rights campaigns after multiple failures of striving for rights by negotiation. In his famous piece "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King stressed the significance of non-violent protest and the procedures of non-violent protest in civil rights movements [8]. Through this means, King successfully forced the white power structure to accept a variety of rights for black people.

Inspired by King's non-violent approach, non-violent protest experienced a revival during the global democratization movement between the late 20th century and early 21st century, including the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protest and the Arab Spring in 2011. Yet, these protests were not all successful. Indeed, the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, one of the sub-revolutions of the 2011 Arab Uprising, successfully fulfilled its purpose. However, the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protest ultimately failed.

2.2 Similarities between the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

The 1989 Tian'anmen Square protest and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution share many similarities. First, the primary protesting area in the two revolutions was centered around a large public square, Tahir Square in the Egyptian Revolution and Tian'anmen Square in the 1989 Protest [9]. This kind of protesting area, which is very central and narrow, results in specific conditions for both protestors and their opposition. Second, the purpose of the two revolutions was the same: to overthrow a highly authoritative regime and adopt a more democratic political system. Third, in both cases, the government forces tried to employ military force to defeat the protestors. Fourth, these two movements were strictly non-violent protests, with the protestors not employing armed weapons during the revolution, even when the military's guns were pointed at them. Finally, the two revolutions were both led by multiple leaders and not by a central icon like Martin Luther King Jr. and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

3. The Difference in Social Class Composition between the Two Revolutions

According to *Al Jazeera*, the largest newspaper in the Middle East, the protestors in the Egyptian Revolution represented all social classes, including merchants, scholars, students, and workers [10]. The protest was generic, and most

of the population participated in the revolution. Sara Khorshid, a journalist in Egypt and researcher focusing on Middle East Revolutions, stated that the protest was widely joined regardless of factors such as gender and social class [11].

The 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest was entirely dissimilar. Throughout the event, students alone served as the major resistant force to promote change. Yan Jiaqi, a prominent Chinese political scientist sociologist, stated that "The 1989 Protest is undoubtedly a 'student movement.' Workers and city residents only played nominal supportive roles and did not really involve in the revolution [12]."



Fig 1: Students from Beijing Institute of Technology Protesting in Tian'anmen Square (Slogan on the Banner: "Blood for Democracy")

4. The Cause of the Difference in Social Class Composition between the Two Revolutions

The difference in the social class composition of protestors traced to the origins of the two movements. In Tian'anmen Square, the cause of the revolution, Hu Yaobang's death, was primarily related to students and intellectuals in China. According to He Xiaoqing, a former professor at Harvard University specializing in the 1989 protest in China, Hu Yaobang was the General Secretary of the Communist Party before his death and an advocate for intellectuals', especially students', rights and the democratization of modern China. After his death, reforms toward democratization were halted as conservatives gradually conquered the Chinese political circle. Students, angered by this situation, planned the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest to urge the government to resume democratic reform [13]. Thus, according to Gerrit W. Wong, a China specialist at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, after Hu's death, only students felt that their rights were abused, and very few workers or merchants joined the protest. Only at the climax of the protest did a small number of workers begin to be involved in the movement [14]. Lv Qinghua, a businesswoman selling fashion clothing in Beijing who witnessed the 1989 protest, explained the reason why other social classes did not join in the protests: "We [the merchant and the working classes] did not even know what the subjects in the slogans of the student protestors such as 'democracy' means [15]."

Reflecting on the Egyptian Revolution, the condition was quite different. A single event did not spur the revolution. Rather, the revolution was initiated because all social classes in Egypt had experienced suffering due to Mubarak's authoritarian rule. Therefore, every sector of the public in Egypt decided to make a change through national protest, according to a news piece written by *the Daily Star*, a newspaper that aims to quickly report first-hand information about social movements [16]. Because of this

collective purpose, the protestors in Egypt were able to engage a large variety of social classes throughout the process.

5. The Effect of the Difference in Social Class Composition on the Two Revolutions

The difference in the diversity of social class composition between the two revolutions resulted in dramatic effects. The first effect was direct: Because most protestors in the 1989 Tian'anmen Revolution were intellectuals, the protest groups could not leverage many protest techniques that could only be implemented by specific social classes. For instance, large strikes could not be implemented without the participation of the working class. Therefore, the protestors, comprised of mostly intellectuals, could only carry out limited hunger strikes and marches, which were largely ignored by the hardline Chinese government officials at the time. Chen Yici, a former pro-student government official during the revolution who was later exiled by the Chinese government, argued that "During the [1989 Tian'anmen Square] Revolution, protestors lacked their 'backbone,' the working class, but only included 'representatives,' the intellectual level. Because of this, vast techniques could not be employed to pose threat to the government [17]."

Meanwhile, because of the pluralism of the protestors in terms of social class, nearly all tactics were available and used to achieve the Egyptian revolution's purpose: overthrowing the Mubarak government. In an interview conducted by the Crown Center for Middle Eastern Studies of Brandies University, Neil Ketchley – an Associate Professor specializing in Egyptian political changes and Fellow at St. Antony's College, Oxford – argued that the protestors in the Egyptian Revolution employed not only common tactics, such as working strikes and shopkeeper strikes, but also more dramatic tactics, including simultaneous mass marches organized through the power of the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islam-based social structure, to overwhelm the military forces' attention [19]. These variable and complicated tactics employed by the protestors in the 2011 Egyptian Revolution laid the foundation for success, pressing Mubarak to give up his leadership of the government.



Fig 2: Egyptian Islamists Rally in Cairo against the Military

A further disadvantage of the absence of a diversity of social classes among protestors should also be mentioned. Before the ending phase of the Tian'anmen Square protest, during which the government employed military forces to forcibly dispel the student protestors, the Chinese government sent professional negotiators to resolve the protest. Because the protestors, who were almost all students and intellectuals, were divided into small factions,

the negotiators managed to shake the morale of each individual protest group by providing promises such as "If you win, the government would not punish you but rather provide you jobs." According to Suzanne Ogden, a political science professor at Northwestern University specializing in China's democratization movements, although this kind of commonly-employed tactic often fails in other revolutions, many student protestors, because of their narrow experience and variable ideology, submitted to the government and returned home, and some even debated with the hardliner student protestors, persuading them to submit as well [20]. This tendency towards compromise, a result of the fact that the protestors were almost exclusively students, never manifested during the Egyptian Revolution.

6. Discussions on Preventing Failures of Non-violent Protests Caused by Lack of Social Class Diversity

One critical solution to the issue of a lack of social class diversity in protest movements is for revolutionaries to choose the right time to initiate revolutions. As previously noted, although the purposes of the Egyptian Revolution and the 1989 Tian'anmen Square protest were similar – to overthrow an authoritarian government and adopt a more democratic system – the social context was completely different between the two events. The Egyptian Revolution broke out at a time when all social classes in Egypt experienced and understood the harm posed by the authoritarian government. In contrast, in the case of the Tian'anmen Square protest, only students were actually "harmed" by the authoritarian Chinese government and mobilized behind the goal to urge a more democratic government. The broader Chinese public was virtually unaware of the harm and did not even know about "democracy." The contrast between these two situations suggests that in order to initiate an effective, widely joined movement, revolution pioneers must wait for a time when all social sectors understand the harm posed by the actors that the protestors want to overthrow. Beyond waiting, another feasible strategy is for revolutionaries to directly educate unenlightened social classes.

In addition to engaging a large variety of social classes, protestors should also employ all possible protesting techniques, including not only generic methods such as work strikes, but also novel approaches such as marches organized through the power of religious organizations, a strategy employed by the protestors during the Egyptian Revolution.

7. Conclusions

This paper analyzed the causes and effects of the difference in the social class composition of protestors during the 1989 Tian'anmen Square Protest and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. By comparing the details of the two influential non-violent protest movements, this paper demonstrated the necessity of a highly diverse social class composition among protestors for achieving success. In addition, the paper provided insights on how to prevent issues caused by a lack of social class diversity in non-violent protests. Non-violent protest will remain the most "socially destructive and self-defeating weapon in social change," as articulated by Martin Luther King Jr.

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