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What impacts did the Arab Spring uprisings have on the local population in Egypt?

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Abstract

Impoverishment of the urban poor in Egypt can be warranted to many causal factors such as environmental degradation, poor economic system, and political instability due to corruption, as was the case in the wake of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. This event had a great impact on the poor as the instability of society and economy deteriorated their living conditions. Thus, the aftermath of the revolution has forced Egyptians to find ways to adapt to their conditions as a means for survival. From an anthropological point of view the Egyptian revolution allowed for vast progress culturally, the future of the Egyptian people has taken on an optimistic outlook in the globalized context.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Egypt

1. Introduction

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution began on January 25 as a continuation of political uprisings in the Middle East starting in Tunisia the previous year. The aftermath of the Egyptian Revolt had many repercussions on the state and the people. This essay will examine the impacts of the revolution on the population in Egypt: it has caused emotional turmoil for the people, made the Egyptian people question the legitimacy of their government, and lastly, this political upheaval has brought on a political awakening in Egyptians and caused them to unify strongly against the regime.

I will be using three anthropological sources to determine the impacts that the Arab Spring has had on the locals living in Egypt: *Meanings and feelings: Local interpretations of the use of violence in the Egyptian Revolution* by Farha Ghannam; *Strength and vulnerability after Egypt's Arab Spring uprisings* by Sherine Hamdy; and *What Is a State If It Is Not a Sovereign?* by Clifford Geertz.

The two additional sources will be from the course textbook Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach, (pages 185-197). My other source will be the article by U. Wikan, *Resilience in the Megacity: Cultural Competence among Cairo's Poor*. I will explore the impacts that the Egyptian Revolution has had on the lower class in Egypt and how this affects future anthropological research on human behaviour and culture.

I will briefly contextualize the Arab Spring uprising within its global context. What I have referred to here as the Arab Spring will be used synonymously with the term Egyptian Revolution. On January 25, 2011, thousands gathered in Tahrir Square to demand freedom and social justice (Wikan 2012:141). The 18 day protest in Tahrir Square ended with the removal of President Hosni Mubarak from power, this came to be more commonly known as the “January 25 revolution” (Hamdy 2012 :43).

2. Anthropological research

This part will analyze the emotional turmoil that the Egyptian population experienced in the aftermath of the revolution, and in doing so will use Ghannam’s article on *Meanings and feelings*. Ghannam looks at the unsettled feelings of common people in al-Zawiya al-Hamra, a low-income neighborhood in northern Cairo and explores their emotional attempts at processing the changing situation during the first days of the revolution. Furthermore, Ghannam examines the use of violence and how it is viewed by men and women in that locale in interpreting the attacks on the protesters in Tahrir Square. These interpretations constructed their opinions of the revolution, Mubarak’s regime, and its supporters (Ghannam 2012:32).

At the onset of the revolution, the residents felt unsafe and worried about their living condition. This uncertainty made them blame the protesters for disrupting their lives, their safety, and for destabilizing the country. These sentiments gained momentum especially after an emotional speech made by Mubarak, where he stated that he would neither run for presidency again nor pass it to his son, and declared that he had served Egypt for most of his life and that he would like to die and be buried on the soil of Egypt. This emotional speech no doubt moved many people in al-Zawiya, who fully supported the president and his plan (Ghannam 2012:33).

However, this sympathy was withdrawn drastically after the attacks on demonstrators (Ghannam 2012:33). The scene Egyptians had seen televised was that of men riding horses who attacked the square, wielding stones, whips and even guns against the peaceful protesters. These aggressors were seen as *baltagiyya*, (thugs) commissioned by government officials to frighten the demonstrators (Ghannam 2012:33). The violent attacks on the peaceful protesters shifted the views and feelings of the Egyptian population of the entire movement, the protesters, and pro-Mubarak supporters (Ghannam 2012:33).

Ghannam examines the use of violence from an ethnographic background and argues that there is a strong relationship between the use of violence and the construction of masculinity in different parts of the world (Ghannam 2012:33). She notes that by observing a person’s routines we can see that they are able to make a clear distinction between proper and improper uses of violence. In the context of the events that took place in Tahrir, the rebels were the *gid’aan*, brave and decent men and women willing to sacrifice their lives for the dignity and good of the whole nation, Mubarak’s government and its supporters were seen as *baltagiyya* (Ghannam 2012: 33).

The second impact that the Arab Spring had on the local population was political illegitimacy of the state in the eyes of Egyptians. As the protests escalated and the violent response by the government intensified the public’s opinion of the Egyptian government deteriorated as we saw in the previous section. This part will use Geertz’s article, *What Is a State*

If It Is Not a Sovereign? to analyze the issues of the legitimacy of a state in ensuring stability and compliance by its citizens and what happens when that legitimacy is rejected (Geertz 2004 :577). Geertz defines the term *nation* (as the OED does), “considered as an extensive aggregate of persons, so closely associated with each other by common descent, language, or history, as to form a distinct race or people, usually organized as a separate political state and occupying a definite territory” (Geertz 2004:580). Geertz points out the difficulty of finding culturally unified entities functioning as “sovereign” political communities in recent times. *State* is characterized (Weberian definition) as a vested authority possessing a monopoly of legitimate violence in a territory (Geertz 2004:581). In regards to this definition, the Egyptian *nation* is comprised of the individuals within the society, who are connected to one another through common history, descent, and language and the cultural, political, and social unity of this nation’s people was seen clearly in the protests in Tahrir Square.

In these terms, Egypt would be considered a state by definition yet the contradiction here is in the Egyptian people’s rejection of this fact due to the manner in which the state resorted to mass violence against its own people. Consequently, the revolt effectively refuted the government for the Egyptian public. A compliant and orderly state would have dealt with the protesters justly by applying the rule of law and proceeding in a democratic manner to demonstrate its strength and stability as a country, but contrarily, the government collapsed and resorted to brutally oppressing the rebels.

This third section will conclude in arguing that the Arab Spring uprising that culminated with the unseating of Mubarak stirred a sense of solidarity among the Egyptian people and the events that unfolded during this outbreak gave birth to a political awakening in the minds of the people. I will use Sherine Hamdy’s piece titled, *Strength and vulnerability after Egypt’s Arab Spring uprisings*. Hamdy takes on the contradictory discourse concerning the rebellion. On one hand the Egyptian protesters were resilient but on the other they were debilitated by years of political corruption and state negligence. These opposing views, of vitality and vulnerability left the people in a confused state between optimism and despair (Hamdy 2012:43).

Hamdy emphasises the overwhelming sense of despair and helplessness felt before the revolt as a result of the political corruption and injustice prevalent in the political sphere. These sentiments were replaced by optimism, fervor, and determination to overthrow the corrupt regime. The inspiring solidarity that was forged in Tahrir Square, spread across religious, class, and gender differences, had lasting effects on people, regardless of their physical presence inside the square or in their homes (Hamdy 2012:44). From an anthropological perspective the unity formed during those days of the protests can be analyzed as progress for human culture, in this case the human culture of the Egyptian people. This is inferred from the transcending of cultural, social, political, and religious barriers that existed between the protesters and their determination in overcoming that for a common good exemplifies the evolution of the human species in an anthropological context.

The solidarity possessed by the antigovernment protesters in Tahrir Square gave rise to political awareness as Egyptians took an active role in their nation’s future and engaged in the protests and the politics of their nation. Thus, the revolution completed the narrative of “complete harmony” between Muslim and Christian, man and woman, the degree of national solidarity practised by the demonstrators was remarkable (Hamdy 2012:47). Its impact can be felt and seen presently in

Egypt as the solidarity among the Egyptian population has become the trademark of the January 25 Revolution.

3. Discussion section

The three primary sources used throughout this paper by Ghannam, Hamdy, and Geertz argued that the 2011 Egyptian Revolution had three interrelated impacts on the Egyptian population. The outcome of the revolt and the use of violence emotionally distressed the public and so in turn they rejected the authority of the Egyptian government and consequently this had a direct social impact, it caused the protesters to forge a solid alliance and unified the people of that country in a time of crisis.

My two additional sources are from the course textbook Cultural Anthropology: A Problem-Based Approach (p.185-197) and the article *Resilience in the Megacity: Cultural Competence among Cairo's Poor* by Wikan. I will critically engage with the question: "How do people living in poverty adapt to their condition"? (Robbins et al. 2014:185) by presenting Wikan's article as a case study to answer this question and will then frame this specific question within my current research paper. The anthropological question raised here concerns the adaptability of impoverished people to their condition. Some anthropologists maintain that the behaviour of people in poverty represents their adaptations to their socioeconomic condition. Such conditions are often the result of inequality, poor economic system or social prejudices (Robbins et al. 2014:185).

Wikan's article contextualizes this argument with the case study of Cairo's poor. In Egypt about two-thirds live below the poverty line of two dollars per person a day (that is, twelve Egyptian pounds). Their life circumstance and prospects have worsened over the past fifteen years as the new capitalism and privatization of state industries (in part enforced by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) have sharpened the gap between rich and poor (Wikan 2012:142). Wikan concludes that the lower-class urban population in Cairo prioritize above all else, making a future for their children. This leads them to employ strategies that further acquisition, investment, and saving rather than consumption and short-term satisfaction. Furthermore, in pursuit of their long-term goal, in the means used to reach it, they rarely destroy one another. On the contrary many of the things that they do to help themselves also help others (Wikan 2012:166). This concept of cooperation can be connected to the course material, particularly applicable to the section "Kinship as an adaptation to poverty" where the author's study of The Flats (black community in the U.S.) demonstrated this kinship, that the residents responded to their impoverished conditions by fostering kinship ties that would ensure economic and social support (Robbins et al. 2014:186).

In conclusion, impoverishment of the urban poor in Egypt can be warranted to many causal factors such as environmental degradation, poor economic system, and political instability due to corruption, as was the case in the wake of the Egyptian Revolution of 2011. This event had a great impact on the poor as the instability of society and economy deteriorated their living conditions. Thus, the aftermath of the revolution has forced Egyptians to find ways to adapt to their conditions as a means for survival. From an anthropological point of view the Egyptian revolution allowed for vast progress culturally, the future of the Egyptian people has taken on an optimistic outlook in the globalized context.

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