Dear CPW,

First off, thanks so much for reading the following draft. This project is a significant departure from my usual work and, as such, I’m a bit unsure as to the best way to present the material. Right now, I’m undecided as to whether this project is even worth pursuing. While all comments are of course welcome, I’d love to get feedback on a couple of issues, in particular, to help me decide whether to continue.

- My first concern relates to the audience. Ideally, this paper would be for an area studies journal, focusing on the Middle East. While I borrow from political science, especially theoretically, I’ve tried to present the material simply and without assumption of prior knowledge. Is this effective? Does it appear accessible to a non-political science audience?

- My second concern revolves around the framing of the question and puzzle. Initially, this project began as a study of labor protests and then later came to incorporate social media more broadly. These elements definitely have to be related better but I’m wondering whether this connection is at all coming through. Can this paper be salvaged, or should I cut it loose? If you think there is something here, but major re-structuring or re-framing is needed, what should be my focus going forward? Frank answers to these tough questions would be much appreciated.

Thanks again!
Trevor
What’s Old is New Again: Social Media, Protests and the Enduring Role of Civil Society

Trevor Johnston

October 4, 2011

1 Introduction

In only eighteen short days—beginning with the call for protest on January 25, 2011 and culminating in the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak on February 11—the Egyptian revolution reignited interest in protest and popular opposition movements worldwide. As revolutionary fervor swept across the region, social scientists, area experts and the media began to focus on the role of the youth movement and their new instrument of revolt, social media. The prevailing narrative was a simple one. Popular frustration with the existing economic and political order engendered massive disaffection among the youth, setting the stage for the revolutionary conflagration that spread across the Arab world. In concert with this growing disaffection, new forms of social media had become readily available over the preceding decade, connecting individuals in untold ways and altering the basic dynamics of activism and protest. The January 25 movement successfully exploited this technology to overcome seemingly intractable collective action problems and coordination challenges, ultimately bringing down the Mubarak regime.

Yet however persuasive this narrative, it grossly simplifies the relationship between protest and social media. Accounts that frame the Egyptian Revolution as a product of Facebook and Twitter ignore history and the many revolutions that preceded social media.\(^1\) The deification of this technology overlooks the complex and conditional effects of social media on democratization and authoritarian survival. Placing the Egyptian experience in context helps reveal the ambiguous effects of social media. As the Iranian and Chinese cases have shown, social media, like any other technology, can be exploited in various ways to buttress the regime and undermine opposition protests. Moreover, even in Iran—where bloggers and Twitter users greatly outnumber those in Egypt—internet activists constitute only a small fraction of Iranian society, and hardly a representative one.\(^2\) At a minimum, these cases should caution us against too quickly assigning much

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\(^1\)In the late 1980s, Xerox and fax machines were the new technology. Like today, many observers fixated on this technology, to which some attributed the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. Other revolutionary contagion events have similarly been assumed to be driven by the technology of the day, like radio and even the telegraph during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

influence to internet activists or social media as a tool for protest.

Notwithstanding the significance of social media and the pivotal role of the youth movement, we cannot trivialize the enduring role of civil society and traditional actors in explaining protest in the Internet Age. These traditional actors greatly complicate the prevailing narrative, interacting with social media in new and important ways. The Egyptian Revolution did not begin *ex nihilo* with a Facebook page. Rather, the revolution reflects a more gradual process, which began over two years earlier on April 6, 2008 with the call for a general strike. Starting with state textile workers in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra and spreading through Facebook, SMS and other social media, the revolutionary movement began not with the Cairene youth of Tahrir fame but rather, originated within a traditional sector of Egyptian society. Public sector workers had traditionally been seen as a vital constituency for the Mubarak regime. Popular media accounts have grossly overlooked the role of the public sector in the broader protest movement and its transformation in the social media age.

In the following paper, I will explore the complex relationship between social media and civil society, focusing on the Egyptian public sector. Since 1952, public workers, unions and syndicates have been critical to the regime’s survival. Yet in 2008, this group began to openly challenge Mubarak, culminating in mass defection in 2011. Explaining this change, from co-optation to protestation, is impossible for existing theories of collective action. It is only when we explore the role of social media, and its effects on protest organizations, can we begin to explain how and why the Egyptian public sector transformed itself from regime client to violent opposition in only a few short years.

The remainder of the paper will proceed as follows. Section 2 begins by debunking the myth of the Twitter Revolution and complicates the simple view of social media as a revolutionary technology. Having shown the potentially repressive effects of this technology, I argue for a conditional view of social media, which better incorporates civil society. Moving from civil society generally, I then focus on the puzzle of public sector workers and their relationship with social media. Section 3 begins with a survey of several competing theories of labor protestation and co-optation. Drawing from this account, Section 4 then traces the role of Egyptian labor overtime, highlighting the various ways in which workers have engaged with both the opposition and government. Section 5 then takes up the question of social media and its effects on labor protests since 2008. Finally, Section 6 concludes, taking stock of the evidence marshalled and discussing future work.

### 2 Revolutionary Technology or Technology of Repression?

Most popular accounts of the Arab Spring and recent uprisings focus on the transformative role of social media. According to this narrative, the proliferation of social media websites like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter has reduced the organizational costs of protest. Using these new media, modern day revolutionaries can rapidly, cheaply and widely disseminate their message, organizing
across traditional sectoral and social cleavages with relative ease. In short, technological change has provided the masses with the power to challenge dictators in ways never before possible.

This is of course a simplified and highly idealistic depiction, but nonetheless a popular one among many “cyber utopians.”\(^3\) The purported benefits of such technology is obvious and daunting. By connecting distant individuals and making information transmission nearly instantaneous, would-be revolutionaries can identify each other to build up their activist networks. This revelation is a critical first step in challenging dictatorships, which rely on incomplete information and the subversion of common knowledge to deter protest.\(^4\) Now, all it takes is internet access to meet one’s confederates online and begin to plan the revolution.

This next step, organizing among activists and coordinating protests, is no less important. A Facebook page can publicly announce a meeting or protest, Twitter allows for real-time broadcasts and coordination, and YouTube is an effective medium for galvanizing supporters. Each of these tactics have been used to varying success in popular uprisings worldwide. Arguably though, no where were these tactics deployed more effectively than in Egypt. From the “We Are All Khaled Said” Facebook page to Asmaa Mahfouz’s impassioned YouTube call for protest, young Egyptians bravely showed the world that social media’s time had come and the Twitter Revolution had begun.

Yet for all these potential benefits, social media portends just as many threats in the hands of a tech-savy, sagacious dictator. In the face of cyber-activism, authoritarian regimes have two general strategies available. First, they can choose to shut down the sources of opposition. This may take the form of focused, targeted attacks on prominent bloggers and Twitter users, or may be as expansive as shutting down the entire country’s internet access. The former is a popular tactic in Iran, while the latter was seen in Egypt in 2011 and Moldova in 2009.\(^5\) This strategy, however, is at best a desperate act during periods of great instability. Blacking out an entire country or even targeting activists often inspires greater opposition among the local populace and invites international attention.\(^6\)

Rather than combat social media, the second strategy exploits this technology to the regime’s advantage. It is this response that is most dangerous to activism and if manipulated effectively, can make social media a great tool for authoritarian survival. China and Russia both allow social media to operate within their borders, albeit with censorship, as a means to track and monitor dissident activities. Since its near collapse in 2009, the Iranian regime has also permitted social media to flourish, while they increasingly focus on identifying individual bloggers and groups to monitor their movements. When social media publicly broadcast information critical to organizing (e.g. time and location of protests), it exposes opposition leaders while also informing the regime of their plans. Worse yet, public access to these sites further allows the regime to spread disinformation, used to

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bait and entrap would-be protestors.\textsuperscript{7}

However the regime responds, proactively or reactively, it is clear that social media can have perversely counter-productive effects on activism. Given such ambiguity and complexity, it is puzzling how social media and cyber-activists have come to take on such a predominant role in recent narratives on the Arab Spring. Although simplified and sensationalist media accounts certainly contribute to this narrative, the problem has deeper roots. A major part of the social media fallacy reflects a perniciously latent Orientalism, which assumes that the peoples of the Middle East, Asia and Eastern Europe lack social capital or a developed civil society. Absent social capital or civil society organizations capable of challenging the regime, these peoples remain repressed, waiting for social media to liberate them virally.

This implicit assumption ignores the robust and developed civil society in these countries. While they may not be bowling together in Cairo or Manama, Arabs of all ages and social backgrounds look forward to Friday nights at the cafe, where they drink coffee or tea, smoke, gossip and play games. Civil society, of course, entails much more than cafes and shisha. In many Arab countries, mosques play a vital role in socialization, community identity and activism. Arguably, no where has the mosque system been more important during revolutionary periods than Iran. Since 1905, revolutionary groups have appropriated religious rhetoric, framing their demands in these terms and tapping into the vast network of mosques in Iran.

The mosque system is but one example of traditional civil society groups that have been overlooked by the modish fixation on social media. Instead of ignoring these groups, we need to better incorporate them into our study of social media and begin to explore the various ways in which these traditional institutions and groups interact with the new technologies of protest. After all, however vast their cyber-footprint, these new revolutionaries still speak for only a fraction of society. A Facebook page with 100,000 fans worldwide means little on the streets when people do not turn out to protest. At best, these campaigns can raise awareness and place mild pressure on distant authoritarian regimes. The real challenge must come from within and will require broad support from society at large, as was seen in Egypt.

Yet even in Egypt, the revolution did not begin with a tweet. Nor can we trace the revolution’s origins to a Facebook page. Had the causes been this simple and driven by social media alone, the revolution likely would have failed. The Egyptian Revolution began much earlier, reflecting a more gradual process involving one of Egypt’s oldest civil society groups, public sector workers. This is not to say, however, that social media was inconsequential. It not only publicized grievances and helped activists organize protests in January and February of 2011, but also played a major role in how the public sector began to challenge the regime as early as 2008. The public sector’s transformation from co-opted clients to regime opponents is perhaps the critical event in the Egyptian Revolution.

To explain this transformation, we must further explore the Egyptian case in greater depth. In the following sections, I will trace the complex history of the Egyptian public sector, as it vacillated between regime opponent and client. Competing theories of collective action fail to fully account for this development and the recent events that culminated in the Egyptian Revolution. Drawing on these theories, I argue that social media and other technology empowered rank-and-file workers, exposing the divisions within the labor movement and allowing for the public sector to openly challenge the regime.

3 Labor Protestation or Co-optation?

Before exploring the Egyptian case in earnest, let us consider the theoretical literature that informs this project. Theories of protest abound within the social sciences and humanities. Despite considerable variation across the disciplines, differing in both method and scope, several approaches have transcended disciplinal differences and found particular traction and popularity. I begin this section by briefly outlining two such approaches: rational models of collective action and the moral economy of resistance. Next, I discuss the role, or lack thereof, for regime co-optation in these models. Studies of authoritarian robustness suggest that labor co-optation is a common strategy for regime survival. Protest models assume labor serve only as agents for change, ignoring their critical role as a bulwark for the status quo regime.

Rational Choice Models of Collective Action  Even before Mancur Olson had popularized the term,\textsuperscript{8} social scientists framed participation in social movements as a classic collective action problem. This approach begins with the simple assumption that actors are instrumentally rational: their decision-making is governed by cost-benefit analysis, maximizing utility over some well-defined preferences. Early scholarship predicted that—given basic incentive problems endemic to collective decision-making, cooperation and coordination—protest movements should experience severe collective action problems that undermine wide-spread mobilization or participation. When individuals can \textit{free-ride}, they have no incentive to actively participate or take costly action. To overcome these problems requires entrepreneurial individuals or leaders, whose provision of selective incentives will help mitigate the free-rider problem and make participation individually rational.

Union leaders have long been the exemplar of this entrepreneurial group. As leaders, who presumably enjoy some form of rent from their elevated position, they have an encompassing interest in the broader labor movement and promoting its goals. These interests compel leaders to develop and deploy organizational capital to mobilize workers, coordinate their efforts and collectively bargain with management. Despite benefiting from the unionized system, without the proper incentives (e.g. selective rewards or punishment) individual workers would not invest their time and effort

when they could otherwise enjoy the same benefits by free-riding. These premises are uncontrover-
sial. The critical debate among rational choice scholars is over the exact incentives and necessary
structures that motivate workers to participate. While some scholars have focused on the macro-
structure governing state-labor relations, including formal bargaining institutions and the political
opportunity/threat environment, these theories all fundamentally argue that protests, labor or otherwise, can be explained by
rational calculus.

The Moral Economy of the Worker The moral economy approach unequivocally repudiates
this claim. Drawing on Karl Polanyi’s delineation between embedded and autonomous economies
(i.e. pre-modern versus market economies), E. P. Thompson argues that rational models of
resistance grossly overlook the non-economic motives that drive protest. Based on his studies of
Eighteenth century English food riots, Thompson suggests that focusing on utility maximization
ignores the social values and cultural norms that influence modes of resistance. Like Thompson,
James Scott advocates for a moral economy approach, which embeds individuals within their social
and cultural context. This context informs individual behavior and expectations, critical to any
collective action. According to Scott, “Woven into the tissue of peasant behavior... whether in
normal local routines or in the violence of an uprising, is the structure of a shared moral universe,
a common notion of what is just.” This quote highlights a critical element of the moral economy
approach: classes or groups are socialized in such a way that their behavior follows from a shared,
common set of values defining what is and is not just. While focusing on the peasant, Scott’s
description is apposite to workers as well. Scott and others reject rational choice models precisely
because they privilege economic calculus at the expense of these socially embedded and culturally
contingent behaviors.

The moral economy approach further differs from collective action models in terms of the
root cause and goals of resistance. Rational choice models are fundamentally agnostic about the
grievances and goals that motivate protest. Actors determine their strategy by maximizing expected

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utility subject to existing constraints. Thus, the goals and mode of resistance depend on what individuals believe is optimal or feasible. These opportunistic goals can vary from simple wage increase to full-scale revolution. By contrast, moral economists argue that resistance is principally “restorative” and defensive, seeking to recover lost privileges.\footnote{Marsha Pripstein Posusney. “Irrational Workers: The Moral Economy of Labor Protest in Egypt,” World Politics 46, 1993.} Within embedded economies, workers (like other subaltern groups) are entrenched in a series of patron-client relationships. For moral economists, resistance obtains when the system fails to meet the basic subsistence promised by the tacit social contract that underpins these relationships. When these expectations are not met and norms are violated, workers will employ a myriad of regime immobilism tactics, what Scott calls the “weapons of the weak,” to restore the antecedent social order.\footnote{Scott, 1976.}

**Authoritarian Robustness and Labor Co-optation** However persuasive these theories may be, the question of labor co-optation is completely absent. Although one may respond that the moral economy approach implicitly suggests that labor quiescence reflects regime co-optation—only at a deeper social and cultural level—these phenomena are by no means observationally equivalent. By focusing exclusively on protest, the rational choice and moral economy models have grossly overlooked the role of labor as a regime supporter. No matter how incompatible these models may or may not be, they each address the same basic question, what motivates labor protests? Implicitly, this line of inquiry assumes that labor principally serves as an instrument for change and agent of revolt. This premise, on which moral economy and early rational choice theories are predicated, is entirely distinct from later political economic models. Whereas earlier accounts assume that workers are integral to protest, serving as the engine of opposition movements, later theories have begun to ask how regimes co-opt workers, who can become bulwarks for the state and help suppress the opposition.

When we move beyond the simple question of labor protest, we can begin to explore why regimes strategically target this group and cultivate them as clients.\footnote{Gandhi, Jennifer, and Adam Przeworski. “Cooperation, Cooptation, and Rebellion under Dictatorship. Economics and Politics. 2006.} Theories of authoritarian robustness suggest that autocratic rulers will enfranchise particular groups or sectors within society whose support is vital to regime durability. While some have focused on the military, and others on business elites, relatively few studies directly consider the role of the public sector.\footnote{A notable exception is Kim, Wonik and Jennifer Gandhi. “Coopting Workers under Dictatorship.” The Journal of Politics. 2010.} This marginal focus is actually surprising given a distinct literature, drawing on rentier theory, which suggests that oil and gas rich states regularly inflate their public sectors and state bureaucracy as a means of redistribution and clientelistic co-optation.\footnote{For a review, see Byman, Daniel and Jerrold Green. “The Enigma of Political Stability in the Persian Gulf Monarchies.” Middle East Review of International Affairs. 1999.} Rentier states have maintained their stability without

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granting institutional reforms by sagaciously co-opting elements of society, the bureaucracy being one such group.

While Egypt may not be a rentier state in the strictest sense, it too has a massive public sector. In the next section, I will trace the public sector’s role in protest, exploring whether it is an agent of change as the rational choice and moral economists would suggest, or rather a bulwark of the state. These contradictory roles have somehow gone unnoticed or simply unscrutinized. How can it be the case that labor serves both as an important constituent, helping maintain the authoritarian system and, at the same time, a vital pillar within the protest movement?

4 The Dynamics of Egyptian Labor Participation and Co-optation

Before delving into the most recent period, which exposes some of the weaknesses of existing theories of protest, let us first consider how these models have been applied, to varying success, to explain Egyptian protests since 1952. Beyond simple framing devices, these competing theories have largely defined the terms of the debate, greatly informing the dominant narratives seeking to explain protests within Egypt. Consequently, rather than present wholly agnostic accounts of Egyptian history, scholars have constructed these narratives of protest and accommodation as theory confirming instantiations. The debate between Ellis Goldberg and Marsha Pripstein Posusney particularly underscores this dialectic framing.

Labor Protests since 1952 At his heart, Ellis Goldberg is a Coaseian. Consonant with rational choice models of collective action, Goldberg’s analysis of Egyptian labor begins with the factory, exploring the relationship between workers and owners within individual firms and plants. He likens this dynamic to a classic principal-agent model in which owners have to regularly monitor workers to prevent shirking. The development of unions and collective bargaining arises out of a need to overcome the free-rider problem within individual factories.

Implicitly responding to the moral economy critique, Goldberg relents that not all behavior is completely rational. Union leaders and activists must derive additional (i.e. non-material) benefits to motivate them to take on such Herculean efforts to mobilize their co-workers. Goldberg admits that these benefits may not be strictly rational but this does not detract from the overall claim that the behavior of “activist workers in plants was intentionally rational.”

Drawing on the memoirs of trade union activists in Al-Mahallah Al-Kubra, Goldberg argues that the antagonism between workers and managers largely determines whether labor is deployed productively. Plant specific attributes (e.g. size, required skill of the workers) influenced how workers mobilized, resisted

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20 The prominent economist Ronald Coase was the founder of transaction cost economics, which re-focused modern micro-economic theory on the level of the firm.
22 Ibid, 114.
and whether the system was profitable for workers and owners. Ultimately, Goldberg argues that these firm-level and plant specific relationships are just as important for understanding Egyptian labor as it is in advanced democratic contexts. Although the utility maximization may differ, the decision-making process remains the same across these contexts, reflecting the rational calculus governing labor-state relations.

Taking up the moral economy approach, Marsha Pripstein Posusney unequivocally rejects purely rational accounts of labor organization and protest. Responding directly to Ellis, she convincingly shows how the overall pattern and history of labor protests better reflect moral economy predictions than those deriving from rational choice models. Posusney’s account explores two major features of Egypt’s labor history that substantiate her argument: protest timing and the mode of resistance.

First, consider the sequence and timing of protests. In contrast to rational choice models, Posusney shows how protests are more likely to occur during recession and periods of economic decline. Nasser’s socialist reforms unambiguously defined the Egyptian state as a patron for society at large and workers in particular. From subsidizing basic foodstuffs to managing and steering rapid industrialization, the growing Egyptian state became seen as a guarantor of the people’s quality of life. Workers were especially important in this process. A series of reforms in the early 1960s raised the minimum wage, set maximum working hours and promised to provide additional benefits and bonuses. All of which would elevate the expectations among workers, setting up the state for future protests when these generous benefits would be scaled back during periods of economic decline. It is during these periods that the moral economy expectations are particularly sharp. Posusney documents how a series of protests in the 1970s and 1980s corroborate these predictions. Even before Sadat began opening up the economy, inftah, through neo-liberal economic reforms, steadily decreasing wages and benefits introduced profound shocks within the national workforce and inspired protests throughout the country and across various industries. This opposition reached as much as 30,000 workers at the Helwan Ironworks in 1971.23 Similar protests would erupt throughout the coming decades. Despite varying in intensity and frequency, they usually followed government announcements reducing wages, subsidies or other state benefits that workers had come to expect.

Second, Posusney argues that the moral economy approach better explains the mode of resistance among Egyptian labor protests. When facing a loss of entitlements, labor protests often took the form of restorative resistance, including sit-ins, strikes and symbolic protests targeting the state and its abrogation of the implicit social contract. Posusney recounts one illustrative moment when in 1972, private sector textile workers walked out in Shubra al-Khayma. The Nasserist ideology and reforms were so profound that even private sector workers felt that the state had cheated them by not ensuring higher benefits. Despite being employed by a private firm, these textile workers targeted their rage and frustration towards the government itself—rather than the owners of the firm—a clear indication of the prevailing moral economy perspective that defined labor protests.

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Symbolic resistance of this form is extremely problematic for rational choice models. Ellis’s fixation on the firm and the interaction between workers and management has no real place for the government and its implicit promises.

**Co-optation and Challenges to The Protest Narrative** Despite their popularity, these theories are hardly unassailable, especially as we begin to extrapolate from them in an attempt to understand the recent labor protests in Egypt. Arguably, one of the greatest challenges a moral economy approach faces is the question of its current relevance. While many scholars admit that the approach is not strictly confined to pre-modern, pre-market economies, its basic premises require that the classic patron-client relationships— and their concomitant norms and expectations— prevail within society. However difficult to define or formalize, the moral economy approach requires that most workers expect the state to provide a certain level of benefits and quality of life. It is debatable whether Egyptian society is still governed by these norms of patron-client relationships, especially after Sadat’s *inftah*. By initiating costly, dis-locating reforms, Sadat hoped to effectively sever these clientelistic ties while promoting private sector growth and development. I would argue, however, that although the neo-liberal reforms certainly resulted in severe social and economic dis-locations, they have by no means entirely supplanted or replaced the traditional patron-client culture within Egyptian society. Moreover, the moral economy argument does not assume an economy that is entirely dominated by these ties. In reality, most societies fall along a continuum, reflecting elements of both embedded and autonomous economies. This is especially true for countries in the developing world and applies in Egypt as well.

More problematic, the moral economy approach is predicated on the idea of protest as restorative, rather than revolutionary. While this may have prevailed in the past, it clearly fails to describe the country-wide conflagration that brought down Mubarak’s regime. Across the country, protesters called for more than a return of benefits, signalling their resolve for nothing short of full-scale regime change. On the eve of the revolution, in December 2010, 800 public sector textile workers staged labor protests and sit-ins at the Mit Ghamr Spinning Company. In line with the moral economy argument, the protesters called for back-pay and a restoration of rescinded bonuses. In concert with a growing frustration over a stalled minimum wage bill, the Mubarak regime responded with an expansive stimulus package, targeting public sector and government employees with generous loans. At the height of the protest, few remembered or cared about such concessions from the Mubarak regime. In fact, a three-day textile strike at Ghazl Al-Mahalla culminated in the protesters’ demands being fully met. And yet despite this success, “Neither workers nor employers paid much attention to these calls for the protests to stop.”

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26 “‘Make your dreams come true’, with public sector loans.” *Ahram Online.* January 6, 2011.
were simply too little too late. Social mobilization and accumulation theory would suggest that the movement had become too great to be pacified by simple fiscal transfers or (incredible) promises for future benefits. The genesis of the revolution better reflects a cascade model, as propounded by Timur Kuran, in which the protesters had reached such a critical mass that there was no relenting or settling for modest goals of wage increases.

While these theories face difficulties in fully explaining the recent labor protests and the revolution, *prima facie* the argument for labor co-optation seems entirely bankrupt. In her recent book on distributive politics in Egypt, Lisa Blaydes investigates the political economic underpinnings of the Mubarak regime. She argues that the regime selectively cultivates and targets critical constituencies, one of which being public sector employees. Targeted bonuses and subsidies, especially during periods of economic insecurity and electoral campaigns, reveal the regime’s sagacious cultivation of this vital social group. Although early reports seemed to suggest that public sector workers may have helped support the regime and suppress the opposition, as the movement grew, so too did the number of strikes and protests. Even if some fraction of workers supported the regime, this group had to be dwarfed by the number in the streets. This leads us to ask whether the co-optation model is wrong, or have these media accounts simply missed a more subtle dynamic?

While it is impossible to answer this question conclusively, I would suggest that reality is closer to the latter than the former. In a counterfactual world, one in which the regime had not co-opted labor, the protests would have been far more severe and widespread. After all, for all the media focus on the strikes in the previous years, there was relatively little achieved. Moreover, the scope of these strikes and demonstrations—until recently that is—have generally been quite limited. It is not the case that workers simply did not have grievances. Rather, the regime had co-opted elements of the public sector movement and erected structural and legal barriers to protest. Wide-scale co-optation is extremely costly. Blaydes’s study of distributive politics suggests that the targeting of benefits should coincide with elections, providing the regime with vital support when facing a popular referendum on its rule. In these punctuated periods, the regime can afford mass transfers to workers writ large. In normal periods, however, it must rely on a more focused form of co-optation, targeting a subset of workers, in particular, the union and syndicate leadership.

These leaders, in most contexts viewed as the vanguard for worker interests, are installed by and serve the regime’s goals, monitoring workers while undermining their efforts to organize collectively. Collective action problems are hard enough without the purported leaders undermining attempts to mobilize support and overcome the high costs to protest. These leaders have been entrenched and buttressed by national laws regulating the public sector. Labor law has undergone significant change since the establishment of the Civil Service Commission and Law No. 10 in 1951. Beginning in 1983, with Law No. 97, the Mubarak regime began to undercut the power of the public sector,

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29 “Who are the pro-Mubarak demonstrators?” *CNN*. February 2, 2011.
encouraging private sector growth while further stripping state employees of bargaining power and organizational capital.\footnote{See Law No. 97/1983 Promulgating Law Regarding Public Sector Organizations and Companies.} Perhaps most controversially, Law No. 100, passed in 1993 and later amended in 1995, has subtly but perniciously regulated the internal organization of labor unions. The law requires that the election of union leaders meet a quorum of 50 percent of the members. According to Mohamed Abdel Nour, a Bar Association member, the law “was so bad that the professional unions suffered extreme stagnation,” and undercut any chance “for holding fair elections inside the unions.”\footnote{Emam, Amr. “Ruling Divides Egypt’s Professional Unions.” The Gazette Online. January 6, 2011.} This stagnation reflects a calculated and deliberate move by the regime. By raising the threshold for electing leaders, the regime gave their own candidates an advantage, providing financial incentives to turn out for the vote only when necessary and ensuring little leader change or accountability overtime.

5 Co-optation versus Participation: A False Dichotomy

The preceding sections have framed the question of labor’s role as one of either co-optation or one of participation. This discussion has exposed some of the fundamental tensions in the existing literature, which I argue partly derives from this framing. The role of labor is neither fixed nor static, varying over time and across sectors. As such, it is possible for various elements to participate in protest while others simultaneously support the regime.

In the past, explaining such contradiction has been difficult. The explosion of new social media makes this question not only feasible, but even more relevant today. With the proliferation of new and independent media, the delineation between activist leaders and the rank and file ceases to be so distinct. Official union or syndicate leaders no longer hold a monopoly over the organizational capital. In a genuine democratic or corporatist system—where the leadership is not co-opted—union leaders deploy this capital to more effectively marshal workers to press for demands and collectively bargain with management and the state. In authoritarian regimes like Egypt, however, union leaders have been bought off and co-opted. Rather than support labor conditions, these co-opted leaders use their privileged position to suppress meaningful protest, supporting the regime and thus maintaining their position to maximize future rents.

This system of co-optation, while successful in the past, has been fundamentally challenged by new media. Twitter, Facebook and YouTube provide individuals with the technology to coordinate independent of formal leadership or union support. Even if all workers do not fully embrace these media or have ready access, their ability to open up the space for pluralist dialogue and counter-regime propaganda has profound implications.

Organizational Capital in the Digital Age Philip Howard argues that the proliferation of social networking websites and independent media has created “unique new means of civic organiz-
Howard recounts an activist’s Tweet, “We use Facebook to schedule the protests, Twitter to coordinate, and YouTube to tell the world.” This Tweet reflects some of the major organizational changes we have seen in the digital age: the rapid mobilization of support, wide coordination of protests, and capacity to generate international interest and pressure the regime by publicizing the movement.

This technology is so effective precisely because it taps into a basic element of society– individuals need to connect and relate with one another. Sociologists like Mark Granovetter have long explored the relationships between individuals within social networks, where people are connected to each other be a series of strong and weak ties. Recent work has formalized Granovetter’s insights, providing a mathematical and computational basis for this analysis. This literature suggests that the successful spread of a revolution is not as simple as Kuran’s model implies. Individuals are more easily compelled to join a protest or other collective enterprise when they see their friends and family taking part. While weak ties matter as well (e.g. fellow citizens’ abuse documented on television), cascades are fundamentally driven by strong ties, where individuals flood into the street as they witness the participation of their neighbors, classmates and family.

Given this general context, the question becomes, how have these new social media helped liberate workers from their co-opted or repressed position? First, there is the symbolism of the revolution and the April 6 movement itself. The engine of the revolution, the April 6 movement, grew out of support for the textile workers at Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra. Frustrated with low wages and increasing food costs, workers at the Misr Helwan Spinning and Weaving Company planned to strike on April 6. The call to strike is not all that rare in present-day Egypt. Even in the Nasserist Egypt of the 1960s, public sector labor demanded higher wages and better working conditions, at times resorting to protest. Over the past decade, there have been a series of isolated, small-scale protests and strikes throughout Egypt, ratcheting up in 2006 and 2007. In fact, the industrial city of Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra witnessed many such incidents, even at the same textile factory in December of 2007. In 2008, however, the strike attracted national and global attention when Ahmed Maher and others formed the April 6 movement, creating a Facebook page that soon went viral. By the day of the protest, the group had tens of thousands of followers and the once-isolated textile workers strike swelled, growing into a general strike, boycott and call for resistance.

Ultimately, the strike failed. Security forces occupied the factory at dawn, intimidating workers and preventing any strike from taking place. Throughout Egypt, workers were cowed, as most people went about their day as normal. However, in Al-Mahalla Al-Kubra’s main square, protesters

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33 Ibid.
35 For review, see Wasserman, Stanley. Social network analysis: Methods and applications. Cambridge University Press. 1995.
clashed with police, leaving scores dead and a movement born. Over the next few years, the April 6 movement and its support for worker solidarity continued to encourage protest and cyber activism.

While many accounts suggest that the strike failed because of state repression, we cannot overlook the role of union leaders at the factory. The strike’s failure exemplifies the problem confronting workers. Despite broad support from the workers on the floor, representatives from the “the government-backed factory union distributed leaflets in an attempt to persuade workers not to strike.”38 After this attempt failed, and the police presence became necessary, trade union officials spoke with media to help disseminate the regime propaganda. One such official, Mosaed Al Feqqi told the *Gulf News* that “Workers realized that certain opposition groups sought to exploit their strike for their own political agenda,” choosing instead to “cancel their work stoppage.”39 While many opposition groups had undoubtedly latched onto the idea of a general strike in hopes of achieving their broader goals, the April 6 Facebook page and other media stressed their support for the workers’ cause. The union representative’s statement suggests that the workers reached a consensus and *chose* to cancel the strike, a depiction in stark contrast to the police presence and violence in the streets. The union leader, Sayyid Habib, further claimed that the government hoped to meet the workers demands, calling for patience and begging “We have to give them a chance to see improvements.”40 This quote is ambiguous, as it is unclear whose side Habib represents. In the co-opted world of Mubarak’s Egypt, such confusion is common.

However, to focus only on the atmospherics and symbolism would be grossly simplistic. New social media have also influenced how these groups organize themselves. Although the combination of repression and co-optation succeeded in stopping the protest in April 2008, by January 2011, the regime had reached a breaking point. As protests spread throughout the country, so too did the labor strikes. Emboldened by the youth in Tahrir Square– whose earlier moniker referred back to the failed April 2008 strike– workers across the nation and from various sectors rose up. From public transportation,41 to textiles and other manufacturing and service industries, strikes raged across the nation. Social media websites, text messages and SMS allowed for protesters and strike organizers to coordinate their activities. These media also helped inspire farmers– an especially diffuse group that generally poses significant challenges to mobilize– to join in the protest. From Assiut to Port Said, these farmers “voiced their support of the Tahrir movement,” which had “reignited labor discontent.”42 Rejecting the promises for increased pay, many of the state workers called explicitly for the removal of “corrupt trade union leaders tied to the president”43 and co-opted managers, as in the case of state electricity workers at the South Cairo Electricity Company.44

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This growth, beyond the factory and sectoral divides, reflects another critical aspect of the social media age. In the past, workers were insulated from other elements of the protest movement. Prevented from forming independent unions, workers were forced to rely on state-supported and controlled syndicates. Having compartmentalized workers in this way, coordination across sectors, let alone across the broader opposition movement, was extremely difficult. The call for a general strike, expanding into a national boycott and day of protest, was impossible without some form of communication that transcends sectoral and class divisions.

These changes culminated in the foundation of a new, independent trade union. Comprising a coalition of white collar and blue collar workers, the union claimed to be uncompromised by regime cronies and a champion of workers’ interests. On January 30, 2011, the Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions (FETU) publicly announced its formation, calling for fair wages and “democratic rights to organize.” The press statement was picked up by media and blogs around the world, helping amplify the call for labor rights and a general strike. Over the next two weeks, the Center for Trade Union and Workers’ Services (CTUWS) published a series of press statements from the new union, citing how state-sponsored unions had monitored, reported on and controlled workers at the behest of the regime and contrary to workers’ interests. The FETU excorriated these government unions and their leaders, criticizing the fraudulent elections that installed them and promising for greater transparency in the future. After Mubarak’s resignation, the union released a statement, claiming that workers “did not start” the revolution, but were its “vanguard,” which they defined as dedicated to achieving workers’ demands.

6 Conclusion

I began this paper by challenging popular narratives that focus on cyber-activists and social media as the agents of change during the recent Arab Spring. My retort is a simple one: social media can have various effects on activism, good and bad, but alone cannot explain the revolutions seen in the Arab world. In focusing on the Egyptian case, I have argued for a greater incorporation of civil society, in general, and public sector workers, in particular. Hosni Mubarak faced increasing pressure over the past several years as the public sector seemed to transform itself from co-opted client to regime opponent.

In part, this transformation is not so stark or surprising. The conflicting role of the public sector derives from a fundamental misunderstanding of the distinct and, at times, antithetical goals of labor union leaders and their organizations’ rank-and-file members. In Egypt, unions, syndicates and trade associations have been highly controlled by the regime, which cultivates these

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groups as important clients. Co-opted by the regime, these leaders not only fail to defend workers’ interests but deliberately subvert them. Exploring the tensions between these co-opted leaders and their revolutionary rank-and-file has been frustrated by early work that has conflated these actors’ interests. To understand the complexity of labor protest dynamics requires we differentiate these actors and explore the coalitional politics within public sector movements. I have tried to resolve these tensions by investigating the effects of new social media on labor movements. The proliferation of social media and networking websites has not only exposed the divisions within labor movements, but encouraged them. When labor leaders lose hold of their monopoly on organizational capital, the rank and file can more easily challenge their leaders and the regime itself.

In the digital age, protest can be both leaderless (at least relatively speaking, there is no Vaclav Havel or Lech Walesa) and yet maintain organizational integrity. As Spencer Ackerman put it, “The Jan25 hashtag gave the leaderless revolt an internal organizing tool and global communications reach.” Despite the April 6 movement’s early efforts to coordinate and lead the revolution through Facebook, Youtube and Twitter, the revolution soon grew beyond this group or anyother’s leadership. By the time the Mubarak regime shut down 88 percent of the country’s internet, the movement had grown beyond social media. Having taken on its own life, workers saw their opportunity and decided to challenge their co-opted leadership. The establishment of the Federation of Egyptian Trade Unions came in the heyday of the revolution, but can trace its roots to April 6, 2008, when the marriage of labor protest and social media gave birth to a new form of social movement.

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