

2011 Tahrir Square Demonstrations in Egypt: Semantic Structures That Unify And Divide

Hakim Khatib

Duisburg-Essen University

Abstract:

While literature has focused on political, economic and social indicators to understand the shifts, or rather the fragmentation of the political scene in Egypt, the role of semiotic constructions was significantly if not totally neglected. This article investigates whether the demands and messages produced by protesters of Tahrir Square in January 2011 have played a role in processes of unification and fragmentation of Egyptians. Following Roland Barthes' (2006) and Chris Barker's (2011) methods of linkage to define the meanings suggested by the commentaries that appeared on the banners during the demonstrations of 2011 in Egypt, this article argues that the demands, messages and meanings produced and suggested throughout the demonstrations of 2011 in Egypt have not been responded to accordingly; therefore they have created a complicated transformational process that is replete with polarization. The messages, which brought people to collectively act against authoritarianism, are the same messages that have outflanked them. An Egyptian profound debate to define the signified meanings at Tahrir Square has not occurred in Egypt leaving a tremendous space for interpretations and conflicting perceptions.

Keywords:

Arab Spring, activism, democracy, Internet studies, Egypt

Introduction

The so-called "Arab Spring" began on December 17, 2010 in Tunisia when Mohammad Bouazizi, a vegetable salesman in informal economy, set himself on fire on January 4, 2011. He was denied the opportunity to continue his low-paid job and his action was to protest against mistreatment by the local police and government authorities. Protests, which were attended by informal workers, lawyers and most importantly the youth, spread quickly

from rural areas to urban locations in Tunisia. This civil protest led to the removal of Zine Al-Abdin Bin Ali after two decades of dictatorship.

These protests then spread to Egypt where they were instrumental in toppling Hosni Mubarak, who had been in power for almost three decades. Following the January demonstrations in Egypt, protests spread to Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Syria, Jordan, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia. There were also some protests in Morocco, Iraq, Lebanon and Palestine, but these were not sustained long enough to resonate in the media.

The uprising in Egypt was predominantly a campaign of nonviolent civil resistance which featured a series of demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience, and labor strikes. The key motivations for these mass demonstrations in Egypt were political (repression and restrictions on civil liberties and political rights) and economic (inequality, poverty, unemployment, inflation, and corruption). Neither purely political concerns such as the desire of Arab populations for democracy, nor simple economic trends can wholly explain the protesters' desire to overthrow the autocratic rulers. The interaction of both factors caused the uprisings. Furthermore, the collective incapacity, that was unable to make significant change, turned into a collective action manifested by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators demanding their rights to end the authoritarian rule. While people had no other channels to express themselves, they mounted banners and drawings and chanted songs and slogans to convey clear messages to the internal and external frontiers of their society. Consequently, a constructional process of semantic structures has emerged to express peoples' demands.

While the demands of people at Tahrir Square were pretty straightforward, they have been partially or completely neutralized paving the way for a polarization process of the very semantic messages they demanded. But the question here is why could these messages unify Egyptians at the times of demonstrations and then fragment them throughout the process? In this article, I argue that the semantic structures produced during the demonstrations at Tahrir Square in 2011 served as a catalyst of unity among Egyptians because they merely achieved change but as a catalyst of division because they collided with the Egyptian traditional discourses about the same messages. Although the messages were straightforward, they were more complicated than it was anticipated due to a lack of a profound debate to define their underlying concepts. People had different and rather conflicting perceptions of these underlying concepts.

This article advances as follows: In the sections after the theoretical review, an analysis of three images chosen from Tahrir Square and published by an Egyptian newspaper will be examined in relation to their cultural and historical connotations. Similar images to support the findings of the paper will be included in Appendix 1.

These photographs were chosen for several specific reasons:

1. They were iconic images produced and reproduced by the Egyptian media and the international media.
2. They all contain significant slogans or phrases that explain and explore the specific cultural contexts in which they were constructed.
3. They are illustrative of the basic demands of Egyptians at that time.
4. They are spontaneous rather than ,staged' photographs.

The text that appears in these three images (and in Appendix 1) covers a broad range of issues that seemed to be important for the Egyptian people.

The analysis of the three photographs of banners that appeared in the protests at Tahrir Square provides a window into the semantic structures and signifying practices produced throughout the protests and sheds light on their social, cultural and historical roots. These images enable us to compare the meanings produced during the uprising in January 2011 to the social, political and economic realities in Egypt after the revolution, namely under the Muslim Brotherhood and later Al-Sisi. The analysis does not explain every aspect of the semantic structures produced throughout the January uprising or the uprising in general, but rather offers a glimpse of some semiotic constructions to understand why messages could equally unify people and fragment them.

Theoretical framework

One of the founders of the field of semiotics, Charles Peirce, argues that “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (1931-58:172). Signs, which can take the form of words, images, sounds etc., have no intrinsic meaning and become signs only when we attribute meaning to them. The-

refores, specific cultural contexts can shape the inherent concepts behind words quite dramatically. For instance, the semantic structures of the phrases emblazoned on the banners during the demonstrations in Egypt could carry different meanings to those same words produced during the Syrian Revolution. The realities and the context, in which these signs were produced, contribute to the definition of the concept being signified by them. Saussure (1916) points out that every sign has to have a signifier and a signified and the relationship between these two components is termed as signification. Therefore, any alteration of context may change the signification relationship between the signified and the signifying.

While language is not a neutral medium for the formation of meanings and knowledge, it constitutes the very meanings and knowledge about the world. As Barker (2011:7) puts it: “These processes of meaning production are signifying practices. In order to understand culture, we need to explore how meaning is produced symbolically in language as a ‘signifying system’.” This constitutes an important part of this article’s attempt to explore and examine the signifying practices of a few slogans being symbolically produced during the demonstrations of 2011 in Egypt. Such an attempt will enable us to understand the cultural references, and to highlight the most important issues demanded, which are non-verbally suggested and signified.

In the majority of communication systems, “the signifying relation is not given analytically: the system proposes only a chain of signifiers, without naming in another way their signifieds: a discourse offers words, not the meaning of each of these words” (Barthes 2006:39). When Barthes wrote about fashion literature, he recognized that signifiers are most commonly given in a physical form, whereas the signifieds appearing in commentaries alongside the imagery. In this case, the “signification”, the relationship between the signifiers and the signified units are given simultaneously (Barthes 2006).

If we apply Barthes’ analysis to the wording that appeared on the banners during the demonstrations in Tahrir Square in 2011 and afterwards, it implies that the analysis could be applied in two forms. In the first form, the whole image could be considered as a signifier with the written words in the banners being the signified. In this sense, the signifier and the signified are given to us simultaneously in what Barthes refers to as “a text and its glossary of words,” (Barthes 2006:43) which helps us “uncover the signifying

units of a continuous message” (2006:44). I argue that this form can only be applied to arranged photographs, and therefore, this form of analysis will not be considered in this article.

The second form, and the one that will be used throughout this analysis is one that considers the phrasing of the banner as the signifier and the background and scenery depicted in the image as the context. This helps us to understand the semiotic structure in which the words or commentaries on banners represent the form of expression (the signifiers), whereas the concept and semantic meaning that lies behind the actual words represents the form of content (the signifieds).

While this analysis does not or is unable to explain and identify all the suggested meanings of all the dimensions of the transformations in Egypt, this article will focus on the second form of analysis taking into consideration the relevance of analyzing the whole image based on the content analysis method proposed by Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001). Leeuwen and Jewitt (2001:15) state: “On each variable, values can be distinguished to yield the categories of content, which are to be observed.” The variables and their intrinsic values are critical to the understanding of the messages and meanings being produced by the demonstrators of Tahrir Square. Categories such as: size, gender, color, setting and role will be considered in the analysis of every image. These criteria will help better identify the signifiers and the signifieds in an organized and systematic manner.

Images regarded in this article focus on the semantic structures of the suggestions, phrases, slogans, and illustrative components imposed by the set of selected banners, which emerged during the period of protests. In this matter we will find the link between the form and the concept, or, in other words, between the signifier and the signified. The purpose of this analysis is to return to the most basic components of the revolutionary demonstrations by scrutinizing the slogans being chanted in the streets of Cairo, which, I argue, reflected to a great deal the real, honest and basic drivers of change in Egypt to act collectively and later divisively.

Image analysis from Tahrir Square

It seems romantic to watch people at Tahrir Square chanting their demands for the first time, but when investigating the semantic structures of their de-

mands we conclude that the same demands which brought people together to construct frames of collective action against dictatorships are the same ones which polarized them throughout the transformation process.

In the following selected images of the protests in Egypt, we are going to examine and explore the signifying practices of protesters (the processes of meaning production) by looking at the words in these images. In turn, the values contained within the images give a deeper insight into how the production of meaning is being conceived.

First image: Bread, Freedom, and Human Dignity

One of the first slogans appeared at Tahrir Square was, as in Image 1, about “bread, freedom and human dignity”. While this slogan was considered the revolution slogan, it only appeared on different occasions for the first several days of the uprising (See also Images 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). Later, this slogan took different variations. The most important one was “Bread, freedom and social justice”. As implied by the slogan: “Bread, freedom, and human dignity” which protesters chanted at Tahrir Square and other places in the region, inequality of opportunity was a central concern.



Image 1. Egyptians gathered at Tala'at Harb Street close to Tahrir Square. The banner behind them says: “bread - freedom - human dignity” [lit. khobz - huriyya - karama insaniyya]. © Image: Mohammad Maroof / Egypt Independent (Almasri Alyawm).

This image was captured in one of the streets next to Tahrir Square in Cairo. It is not a staged photograph and the raised hands and fists suggest the participants are chanting in support for the demonstration.

The age of the people standing directly next to the banner is varied, and their clothing suggests they are from the middle or poorer classes of society. Some have beards, which suggests they may be more religious, while others are wearing more modern clothing. Several of the participants are recording the protest with their mobile phones. All of the participants in this photograph are men.

This dominance of males in the demonstrations reflects the role the men play in Egyptian society. Nevertheless, women participated in demonstrations at Tahrir Square as well but the religious and traditional structures of the fabric of the Egyptian society urges women to rather gather in groups separate from men.

For decades, Egyptians had felt unable to go out on the streets and demand their rights. Therefore, such an incident was important, and accordingly, they tended to record as much as they could of it. The context in which this banner appears is a dangerous one; police forces and regime thugs could easily crack down on the demonstration. Mobile phones also served the purpose of documentation in case these incidents arose.

The banner, written in striking calligraphy on a simple white sheet held above the crowd, is the focus of the photograph. The words “bread,” “freedom,” and “human dignity” appear in green, blue, and black lettering, and it is most likely that the colors have been chosen for aesthetic reasons rather than to convey additional meaning through color symbolism. The same slogan in different colors appeared on other banners throughout the demonstrations (See Images 4, 5, 6, 7, 8). If the different colors of the words had been significant, they should have been consistently observed elsewhere at Tahrir Square.

The construction of the slogan and the order in which the words appear is important. Four words are easier to commit to memory and to chant, and the words create a punctuated rhythm when chanted. In the transliteration of the Arabic words presented below you can see how the ending syllable of the second word rhymes with the fourth:

Khobz, Hurriyya

Karama Insaniyya

It would have been difficult to chant if the order of the words had been “freedom - bread - human dignity“:

Hurriya, Khobz

Karama Insaniyya

The choice of words cannot only be for the sake of rhyming. The meaning of the words and their relation to the social construct of the Egyptian society is substantial because the semantic structures of these signifying units relate to cultural and historical connotations.

Bread

The very first and most basic demand, as signified by the wording on the banner is “bread”. It has superseded freedom and human dignity. This sends a clear message that the basic needs of people are economic rather than political or social. Bread is central to Egyptian life and the Egyptian diet - reflected in the fact that colloquial Arabic in Egypt uses the word *aish* [lit. ,life‘] for bread, rather than the standard Arabic *khobz*, which is used in this banner. While the choice between synonyms (*khobz* vs. *aish*) is never neutral, choosing of the word *khobz* remains unclear because the word *aish* was used in other slogans later on (See Images 7 and 8).

Bread also has historical roots in Egyptian society. A 2013 Business Report article suggests: “Bread has been one of Egypt’s most sensitive issues. President Anwar Sadat triggered riots when he cut the bread subsidy in 1977” (Reuters 2013). In 2008, some 500 political activists and textile workers were arrested and dozens of others injured during clashes with police in the Nile Delta city on April 6 in protests over high bread prices (IRIN 2008). According to the Telegraph (2008), Egypt is the world’s biggest consumer of bread, with each Egyptian eating 400 grams of bread a day. That compares with France - the land of the baguette - where the figure is only 130 grams per day. The symbolic meaning of the word bread in Egyptian society has great importance and represents the daily life of Egyptians. Bread can also be essential for human dignity, so people do not fall into poverty or have to beg for food.

Needless to say, this demand is fundamental for the Egyptian people but it does not define the whole revolution (See Images 9, 10 and 11). However, the discourse about this specific issue witnessed shifts in priorities and can be divided into three categories: The first one is to prioritize the economic conditions people are living. Egyptian media at that time turned from praising Mubarak's rule to looking for the distressed to assert peoples' demands of better economic conditions (Amara 2011; Faruk 2011). The second one stressed that the revolution was not a "revolution of the hungry (or the poor)" [lit. *thawratjiya'a*], but a revolution for freedom and social justice in which the rich as well as the poor participated (Sahsah 2011; Ali 2011; Egypt 2011; Abu Mahfouz 2011). The third one kept on warning from a future revolution of the hungry, as if people in Egypt had not talked about it at Tahrir Square in 2011 (Talab 2011; Al-Marakbi 2012; Algareda 2011). These three discourses had a significant impact on concepts such as hope for better economic conditions, inclusion of the poor and social justice among Egyptian citizens. Moreover, economic activities were disrupted after the January revolution, especially under constant state security breakdown leading to the disruption of tourism, which is one of the most important hard currency earners in the Egyptian economy. This has jeopardized the whole transformational process posing political transformation versus economic challenges.

Freedom

Freedom, the second word on the banner, represents hope and change for the better. It does not necessarily mean freedom of speech and the full package of fundamental human rights. It does not also mean that the Egyptian people consider or fully grasp the meaning of a democratic system as a substitution for the existing one. At the time of the demonstrations in Cairo, people from all spectrums of society chanted the word freedom; for a while, the word acted as a unifying concept. However, after Husni Mubarak was ousted, it became clear that the concept of "freedom" meant very different things for different people. For the Salafis, it meant an Islamic state, and for the secularists a secular state, and so on and so forth. The concept of freedom also relates to cultural and historical issues such as the struggle for freedom against colonialism and the establishment of an independent state. While such struggle for freedom was sometimes articulated in Pan-Arab, liberalist, socialist or communist terms, it was also articulated in religious terms seeking ideological and political alternatives in Islam to socialism, liberalism, communism, secularism etc. (Lapidus 1997; Roy 1998).

Let's take Islamic movements as an example. While the dictators of Egypt - be it Faruk, Nasser, Sadat or Mubarak - suppressed Islamic movements and vehemently supported the enforcement of secularization and marginalization of Islam in educational and legal systems, these movements were active in the social life of the Egyptian society (Lapidus 1997). Such oppression forced these movements to discreetly work and organize to reach their goals (regardless of what they might be). Hassan Al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1928, pushed revivalism in Egypt to a different level. He influenced his subsequent revivalist movements in Egypt to engage in politics, especially in the 1970s when Sadat released Muslim Brotherhood prisoners to counterbalance the leftists and Nasserites, who criticized his neo-liberal policies (Ramadan 1993:167).

While globalization is considered as an extension of colonialism, Islamic movements opposed it representing a modern reaction against imperialist assault (Halliday 2005). Thus, Islamic movements were organized under oppressive regimes to address several issues such as rescuing their societies from Western-dominated regimes and offering them divine salvation. In other words, Islamic movements made strenuous efforts toward freedom by enforcing Quran and the "Sunna" [The tradition of the prophet Muhammad], committing to Islam and retuning to Sharia, helping the poor and returning women to their traditional family roles, and gradually Islamizing the society (Ayyub 1980; Cudsi 1981; Roy 1998; Abu Rabi' 1996).

Therefore, based on cultural and historical meanings, signifiers in Image 1 pose different meanings for different people. Moderate and radical Islamists saw in freedom the concept of the Islamic state and the emancipation of the corrupt and secular rule. As the concept of freedom meant Islamic state for Islamists, it meant freedom from authoritarian regime for some, whereas it meant freedom from poverty or unemployment for others. People at Tahrir Square mounted banners and drawings asking Mubarak to step down in an attempt to be free. When that happened on February 11, 2011, the definition of freedom was boiling up in the Egyptian political discourse.

Human dignity

"Human dignity," the third phrase on the banner, which was later substituted by "social justice," signifies that Egyptians have developed a sense of identity - an Egyptian identity by which human dignity should be respec-

ted and protected (See Images 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8). The dignity of a person is not only a fundamental right in itself but constitutes the real basis of other fundamental rights. Human dignity is essential for the foundation of human rights and relates to the right to live, right to integrity, justice, equality, prohibition of torture and slavery etc. While Egyptians were suffering from all of these violations, the phrase “human dignity” has its roots, more likely mixed with pain and sorrow, in the Egyptian society.

Based on historical and cultural connotations, “human dignity” has different meanings to people from different spectrums of the Egyptian society. For instance, the criteria a conservative Muslim has to preserve dignity (which reaches its peak when talking about Allah, the prophet Mohammad or the Quran) does not necessarily match that of a conservative Christian.

Historically, Egyptians suffered from the repressive regime, which inflicted torture and disrespect on Egyptian citizens such as the increased number of arrests under contingency law provisions, the significant amount of death sentences, the severe restrictions on professional organizations, and violations of human rights.

Culturally, the concept of human dignity is very important for the Egyptian society. It is often used in everyday language. There are several common sayings related to this concept such as: “Everything except my dignity” [lit. *Kulshaiillakaramti*]. This means that people can accept everything in life except the violation of their dignity.

For many Egyptians, I speculate, dignity addresses fundamental rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, religion etc. However, this unified vision ends when they disagree on what taboos are, which might be morally, religiously or/and traditionally sanctioned for some and open for discussion for others. In other words, the volume matters - to which extent human dignity can be guaranteed. A good example can be the issue of homosexuality. Homosexuality is either considered a disease or an anomaly in the Egyptian society. Thus, based on this vision of human dignity, homosexuals do not have the fundamental rights mentioned above. Their behavior should be corrected. In the frame of discussing freedom and human dignity, this issue has recently come to the debate in Egypt. Prominent religious figures such as inter alia Mahmoud Shaaban, Al-habib Al-jifri and Ahmad Al-Tayeb recognized such an “immoral” act to exist only if the person (a homosexual)

does not explicitly express his or her sexual orientation in public (Anwar 2011; Al-Hafez 2013; Al-Bawaba 2014).

In conclusion, during the 18 days of the uprising that toppled President Husni Mubarak - protester chanted “bread, freedom, human dignity and social justice”. This slogan, which was considered the slogan of the January revolution, contributed to unifying people at Tahrir Square producing semantic structures more complicated than it was anticipated. The same words had different meanings and conveyed different messages to their receivers. They functioned as a catalyst of unity and division simultaneously.

Second image: Power and Empowerment

The next photograph addresses power balance and the role of women at Tahrir Square demonstrations.



Image 2. Women demonstrating at Tahrir Square: “Husni Mubarak” on the right and “85 million” on the left. © Mohammad Maroof / Egypt Independent (AlmasriAlyawm).

Power

This photograph was captured in a public setting at Tahrir Square in Cairo and addresses one of the most important issues in the revolution, and that is power. The drawing signifies the change of power balance in favor of the people toward more justice and equality. While Mubarak's power used to be stronger than that of the whole society, the roles have changed and the people are gaining power now. The signifiers are: the scale, the phrases "Husni Mubarak" and the "85 million". This sketch, like many other similar slogans and sketches emerged during the 18-day protest at Tahrir Square, introduces a clear message (signified meaning) - the power balance has already changed and people can decide who remains in power and who does not. (See also Images 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16). Before the demonstrations started, the president Mubarak and his political party had had the upper hand in Egypt. During the momentum of protests, the walls of fear were fading and people started feeling the strength. This change in perception has produced an unthinkable message for Egyptians - "we can make a difference".

State practices under the command of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, Mohammad Morsi, the interim Mohammad Mansour or Abdulfattah Al-Sisi remained entrapped in the old authoritarian mentality of Mubarak and his entourage. The change of power balance was not deep enough to sustain real changes. Again, a concept that was popular during the demonstrations faded because people had to choose between conflicting political powers, namely between the military and its internal allies, and the Muslim Brotherhood. A division in the society followed the division of labor between those who control security, the military, political institutions and those who control ideological networks. In other words, people have been engaged in the schematizing the steps of the transformational process at the expense of their collective goal.

Women role

Women from all walks of life participated in demonstrations at Tahrir Square. However, in this photograph, we see an elderly veiled woman holding a piece of paper and chanting in favor of the demonstrations. According to the conservative and traditional preferences of the Egyptian society, women, old and young, tend to gather in groups separate from men. The fact that these women are veiled signifies that they are from the more conservative side of the spectrum. Based on the type and color of their veils, they cannot be supporters of any Salafi factions. Otherwise, they should have had black Burkas covering their faces (See Image13). If we consider the sketch on the paper as a message and combine it with what the women in

the whole photograph are wearing (another message), we will conclude that these women are more likely to be supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood. Especially the concept of justice, which is very clear in the sketch, is also a core concept of the Muslim Brotherhood's ideology.

While women are protesting against the regime's injustice, a clear message comes across - women play a role in the decision making process and will be empowered after the revolution as they are now. This is significant because it grants legitimacy to the social action at Tahrir Square and enables participants to generate several messages within and across the borders. The most important message is to persuade the international community to support the demonstrations against their long-standing ally - Husni Mubarak.

In conclusion, power and empowerment are central for meaning production. The understanding of the mass culture has changed, and with it, the concept of power. During the demonstrations, Egyptians started talking about the will of people, women empowerment, justice and equality. Unfortunately these concepts lost their brightness too soon, predominantly because they collided with traditional roles of men and women, taboos and the understanding of the relationship between politics and religion.

Third image: Repression and Representation



Image 3. Demonstrators at Tahrir Square. The banner says: That's what you have given Egypt ... what is new? ... Enough! From right to left: Repression - forgery - corruption - deception - looting - cancer - poverty - ignorance [lit. hatha ma qaddamtumoohlmasr... famaaljadede?...kafa! From right to left: Aljahl - Alfaqr - Alsaratan - Alnabh - Altadleel - Alfasad - Altazweer - Alqahr].© Mohammad Maroof / Egypt Independent (Almasri-Alyawm).

This photograph was captured at Tahrir Square right after Mubarak had stepped down in February 11, 2011. While the banner is “professionally” made, which necessitates financial resources for production, the setting and the photograph are spontaneous. This banner represents the resistance and criticism against the remaining symbols of the old regime. The banner addresses important issues the Egyptian society suffers from such as “repression, forgery, corruption, deception, looting, cancer, poverty and ignorance”.

Behind the tents, there are hundreds of protesters chanting against the Egyptian regime. In this photograph, we can see men, women and children participating in the demonstration. However, the male dominance in the photograph still shows that men play a more important role in this protest. Women do not lead the chants but stand on the side along with younger people. The participation of women and children adds two qualities to the protests: Peacefulness and legitimacy. It is peaceful because even children, perhaps with their families, are protesting, which implies that people (men) are not assembling at Tahrir Square to violently confront police forces. It is legitimate because families' joining the protests implies that the demands of the people at Tahrir Square do not only represent one group, one gender or one political party. Their demands represent all Egyptians (See Images 14 and 16).

The banner signifies that Mubarak has been already removed. His removal was signified by drawing an (X) on his photo (See also Image 15). The wording is in two languages: Arabic and English. This reflects the centrality of the language at the times of the uprising. People at Tahrir Square were not only communicating with Egyptians, whose language is predominantly Arabic, but were also communicating with the outside world, using English as an international language (See also Images 5 and 15). The phrase and question “That's what you have given Egypt ... what is new?” is directly addressing the leading figures of Mubarak's regime in an attempt to hold them accountable. Moreover, an answer was given for the question, which

is: "Enough!" This answer implies that Egyptians cannot take it anymore and that they are determined to speak their minds and get rid of authoritarianism.

Photos of ministers and leading figures in Egypt were shown on the banner. Each one of them was given a value that matches his role in reality. For instance, the word "repression" was given to Omar Mahmoud Suleiman, a leading figure in Egypt's intelligence, and the word "looting" was given to Ahmed Ezz, an Egyptian businessman and the former chairman of Egypt's national budget committee and so on and so forth. Under the rule of Mubarak, these individuals represented the government, after the removal of Mubarak; they represented the old corrupt regime. The signified meaning in this photograph, as many mounted at Tahrir Square, alters the balance of power inside Egypt. People are claiming power and building up meanings to produce new signifying practices that had not been used before (See also Images 13, 14, 15 and 16).

Historically, Egypt suffered from political and economic hardships. This banner, therefore, expresses many of the concerns Egyptians shared at Tahrir Square. Mass communication media, globalization and easy access to information brought peoples' awareness to matters such as prosperity, work integrity, transparency and good governance etc. The access to information was not, however, the driver for people to demand their rights, but it was a crucial tool for Egyptians to articulate their demands and compare their political, economic, and social conditions to the world.

While the banner in the photograph tackles a wide range of equally important issues for Egypt, I will be extending only on repression for demonstration. Repression in Egypt has been a key policy to control political opposition. The level of spending on security issues attests that repression had become an essential tool to protect authoritarian regimes in the late 1990s. According to the Physical Integrity Rights Index, an additive index constructed from the torture, extrajudicial killing, political imprisonment, and disappearance indicators and ranges from zero (no government respect for these four rights) to eight (full government respect for these four rights), Egypt scored a decreasing respect of human rights and physical integrity from six in 1985 down to two in 2010 (Cingranelli and Richards 2010). Autocrats aimed to maximize their dwindling assets by dividing citizens

into groups that benefited from co-optation while others were subject to repression. Repression was constant and has been increasing in most Arab countries since independence.

However, this brings us to the issue of representation, which focuses on the question of “how the world is socially constructed and represented to and by us in meaningful ways”(Barker 2011:8). These meanings and signifying practices “are produced, enacted, used and understood in specific social contexts”(Barker 2011:8). The leading figures shown on the banner represented the regime in the past and more likely benefited from co-optation. While they represented the legitimate government in the socially constructed meanings under the rule of Mubarak, they represented “repression, forgery, corruption, deception, looting, cancer, poverty and ignorance“in the newly produced social contexts.

Egyptians created and constructed such meanings in relation to their social context, which has historical and cultural roots. The protesters produced semantic structures, by which they represented legitimacy. The government, which repressed Egyptians for decades by the coercion of police forces and intelligence agents, is no longer representative for the Egyptian people. It is Egyptians, as signified by the photograph, who represent themselves and dare to say to the government there is repression, corruption etc.

The concepts of “repression, forgery, corruption, deception, looting, cancer, poverty and ignorance,” united people at the times of the demonstrations. These concepts triggered collective action because they represented a common suffering of Egyptian people. Again, such concepts divided Egyptians in the transformational process. Unfortunately, the understanding of these concepts was limited by the lack of debate to define the meaning of repression, corruption or any of these concepts. On June 30, 2013, two years after the 2011 revolution, people drove again to protest against the Islamist president Morsi, the first democratically elected president in the Egyptian history. The military, under the command of General Abdulfattah Al-Sisi deposed Mohammad Morsi and launched a repressive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. Few hours later, the chief justice of Egypt’s Supreme Constitutional Court Adly Mansour was appointed to be Egypt’s interim president to launch a transitional process towards new “democratic elections”. Repression remains tempestuous in Egypt. People tolerate repression when it is against other dissenting parties but criticize it when it is inflicted against their own.

Conclusion

As was shown from the analysis of the photographs, the semantic structures of people's demands and messages worked as catalysts to initially unite them against authoritarianism but then to fragment them. Unifying because every party or individual saw their own understanding in these concepts, and thus, joined the momentum to form a collective action. Fragmenting because of the lack of previous debates to define the underlying concepts of these messages. Such debates have not occurred yet in Egyptian discourses. While they are still lacking, the traditional discourses remained intact.

People marched to Tahrir Square with simple demands but were entrapped in a transformation process replete with polarization. People drew on some words from Egyptian historical and cultural contexts and gave them meanings based on their own understanding.

The political and religious polarization processes Egypt witnessed after the removal of Mubarak, followed by the sheer control of the army, then by the strong hold of the Muslim Brotherhood on power, then by the army again, increased violations of human rights to dramatize the functions of unification and fragmentation.

Several years have already passed and people's demands still have not been crystallized yet. Political constructs are not of a better quality; economic growth is wobbling and freedoms of journalism, speech and expression have become worse.

The uncertain future of Egypt cordially invited Islamists to the political landscape and intensely eliminated them. The semantic structures constructed by Egyptians at Tahrir Square primarily signified that not only Egyptians are ready to coalesce and cooperate to reach their goals and reconstruct their efforts but also ready to coordinate and collide while doing so.

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Appendix



Image 4. Egyptian demonstrators mounting the slogan "bread - freedom and human dignity" [lit. khobz - huriyya - karama insaniyya] at Tala'at Harb Square close to Tahrir Square in Cairo. Photo was taken on 11 February 2011. © Image: Mohammad Abdulghani.



Image 5. A group of young ladies carrying a large banner saying “bread - freedom - human dignity” [lit. khobz - huriyya - karama insaniyya] in Tahrir Square on 01 February 2011. ©

Image: Osama M. Hijji.



Image 6. The slogan in black and red writing says “Bread, Freedom, Dignity” [lit. khbz, huriyya, karama] on a wall of the rear of the Mogamma, a huge government administrative building on Tahrir Square. Picture was taken on 12 February 2011. © AlisdareHickson/ Flickr.



Image 7. Demonstrator's demands on a piece of paper in Tahrir Square: "bread - freedom - social justice - human dignity" [lit. aish - huriyya - adala ijtimaiyya - karama insaniyya]. Photo was taken on 25 January 2012. @ Image: May Mustafa F.R/Flickr.



Image 8. Graffiti on Cairo streets: "bread - freedom - social justice" [lit. aish - huriyya - adala ijtimaiyya]. Photo was published on 25 December 2012 by Reise Journal. @ Image: Aysha Selim.



Image 9. Man protesting the scarcity of bread rations suffering from tear gas exposure downtown Cairo in Marouf Street near the junction with Tala'at Harb. "flee and leave, we are unable to find a loaf of bread [lit. Ihrobirhalyanazeef, mush la'yeenhattaalrageef] Again and again during the 18 days of the uprising that toppled President Mubarak - the cry went up from the protesters "Bread, freedom and social justice". The picture was taken on Angry Friday 28 January 2011. ©AlisdareHickson/ Flickr.



Image 10. Demonstrators at Tahrir Square complain about the scarcity of food: "People are hungry" [lit. Alshab ja'aan]. Picture was taken on 20 April 2012. Abdo / Flickr.



Image 11. Demonstrators continue protesting at Tahrir Square: "Our demands is the Freedom to form political parties - Glory to the martyrs" [matalibunahuriyyattakweenalahzab - almajdlilshuhada'a]. Taken on February 19, 2011. © yoppa1/ Flickr.



Image 12. A group of women demonstrating at Tahrir Square in reference to the change of power balance: "Smart Hosni" [lit. Yikhrob betu athka ikhwatu]. This picture was taken on February 11, 2011. © HussamKotb/ Flickr.



Image 13. A woman demonstrating at Thrir Square on January 30, 2011: “Mubarak’s regime is illegitimate” [lit. nizam Mubarak batel]. © Image:SebastienMoros/ Flickr.



Image 14. A group of women demonstrating at Tahrir Square on February 1, 2011. The phrase written in red on the left says: “We stand our grounds until the corrupt leaves” [lit. samidoon hatta yarhal alfased]. The phrase written in green says: “Egyptians, resist!” [qoom ya masri]. © Image:Essam Sharaf/Flickr.



Image 15. People at Tahrir Square asking Mubarak to step down on January 29, 2011. While the content of the message is shocking in an Egyptian context, the fact that people dared to make such a statement and hold it up to a camera without any attempt to hide their identity is unprecedented in Egypt. @ Image: Alisdare Hickson/Flickr.



Image 16. Peaceful anti-Mubarak demonstrations on Tuesday February 01, 2011. Thousands gathered peacefully at Tahrir Square before Mubarak gave his “love his country” speech. The banner says “Mubarak, leave!” [lit. Irhal Mubarak!]. © Image: Zadokite/ Flickr.