The Social Movement and Collective Action Theory: a review of the conflict of change in Egypt

Wisdom Iyekekpolo
Department of Political Science, University of Benin, Edo State, Nigeria.
E-mail of the corresponding author: eyewyz@yahoo.com

Abstract
The social movement and collective action theory provides for likely steps preceding a mass action. This may act as early warning signals for any government to seek corrective measures either positive or negative in order to avert conflict. This paper focuses on the 2011 Egyptian crisis with an analysis of the series of events that led to it and its effect. The paper adopts the Social movement and Collective action theory as espoused by A. Oberschall as a tool in analysing the Egyptian crisis. It further attempts to explain the effectiveness of the theory as an analytical tool and its future utility.
Keywords: Social movement; Collective action; Social conflict; Egypt

1. Introduction

Conflicts are not new to the Middle-East but the 2011 crisis took the region by storm and has left indelible mark in the sands of time. Some scholars have called it a revolution while others have argued it lacks some basic elements of a revolution; this is however not of paramount importance to this essay. This essay seeks to review the happening preceding the mass action and the subsequent outcome using the 2011 Egyptian crisis as a case study to test the effectiveness of the Social movement and Collective action theory as a tool of analysing social conflicts.

2. Objective of the study

This study basically intends to review the Social movement and Collective action theory as espoused by A. Oberschall and its utility as a tool in explaining the 2011 social conflict in Egypt. In its analysis, the essay will

1. ascertain the appropriateness of the theory as a tool for explaining Social conflict;

2. examine the effectiveness of collective action as a means of socio-political change; and

3. predict the future of the Social movement and Collective action theory as a tool for analysing social conflicts.

3. Conflict Theory

A. Oberschall, (2010) in his work "Conflict theory" did a three level categorization of conflict. He referred to the first level as the '**Human nature'**; he argues that the human nature is the root of inter-group violence and warfare. He cited psychologist like Robert Hinde (1997) who postulated that "certain behavioural propensities, including the capacity for aggression, are common to virtually all humans. In Oberschall second level of categorization, he looked at conflict from what he referred to as the **'New wars'.** Here, he analysed insurgencies, ethnic cleansing, civil wars, genocide, ethnic riot etc. He argues that unlike war between States, these "new wars" are undertaken by organized armed group against their governments or other groups with guerrilla tactics, bombings, hostage taking, and population expulsion. Lastly, he reviews **Social Movements and Collective Action** for explaining regimes, how the dynamics of confrontation escalates to civil strife, what outcomes results and whether violence is necessary for change (Oberschall, 2010:177). The theory consists of five components; **issues, framing, mobilization, confrontation and outcomes.** This essay will analyse the 2011 Egyptian crisis using the social movement and collective action theory with a step by step application of its five components.

4. Social Movements and Collective Action Theory: Egyptian 2011 political crisis in focus

The Social movement and Collective action theory provides for some basic assumptions. These include:

A. social movement begins with small group networks, crowds, leaders, activists and ascends to ethnic groups, social movement organizations and regimes.
B. social movement views contentious politics as necessary for social changes and reforms.
C. it views the states as a social control apparatus.
D. it has sophisticated theory of mobilization and confrontation for challenger, consisting of social infrastructure, repertoires, campaigns diffusion, framing, polarization and escalation (Oberschell, 2010:190).

In the study of social movement and collective action theory, five levels or stages of development is highlighted. These were earlier given as the issues, framing, mobilization confrontation and outcome stages. We shall now see the applicability of these components in explaining the 2011 political crisis that erupted in Egypt after that of Tunisia and a consequent overflow to other Middle-Eastern States.

1. **Issues**: The Social movement and Collective action theory points to issues as the beginning of a social conflict. There are normally existing issues, which may be new or long in existence in that particular society. In a regime or government, organized groups with low cost privileged access to political institutions are members of the polity, but less privileged groups and diffuse public are excluded (Tilly 2003; Tarrow 1998). This exclusion is tantamount to deprivation which mostly runs through political, economic and social spheres. This is a likely source of issues which are capable of causing dissatisfaction and frustration. Contemporary social scientists and policy makers generally look upon the high conflict potential of Asia, Africa, and Latin America as a function of widespread frustration traceable to economic deprivation (Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff, 1990:323). Ted Robert Gurr argues that the necessary precondition for violent civil conflict is deprivation; define as actors' perceptions of discrepancy between their value expectations and their environments apparent value capabilities (Gurr, 1970:36).

   There are some clear issues that had ignited the conflict in Egypt. It has been observed by researchers that there has been wide spread discontent among the urban Egyptian masses and a host of socio-economic factors that breed this kind of discontent which are capable of heating up the polity. Jeremy M. Sharp (2011:6) has pointed out four issues that apparently kick started the Egyptian crisis. Firstly, was the recent sectarian violence, then secondly, an apparently rigged parliamentary election, a third issue was the uncertainty surrounding the Presidents succession and lastly the success of the Tunisia "Jasmine Revolution". All these combined were some of the immediate issues that necessitated the crisis. Remote issue included the Hosni Mubaraks government stance on Arab-Israeli relation and the issue of Egypt–Israeli 1979 Peace Treaty. Also, the significantly declining well being of all income groups since 2005, with only the richest 20% of the population trending positively since 2009 (Gallup, 2011).

2. **Framing**: As dissatisfaction and discontent mount, adversaries frame the issues within rival belief system, shared folk knowledge, and ideologies –inequality, human rights, democratic norms etc. The organizing frames transform individual discontent into shared public grievances and call for relief through public actions. The adversaries organize around identity symbols expressed in slogans, songs, dress and hair styles, uniforms, flags, colours and other visible markers for identity and commitment (Oberschall, 2010:177). The Egyptian issues were framed around ideology. The masses wanted democratic norms entrenched in their government and on this democratization request, they hinged their identity symbols which they expressed as slogans like 'Down Mubarak' and the lifting of their shoes as a mark of disrespect for the government.

3. **Mobilization**: Oberschall 2010 explains that competitive mobilization erupts with leaders and activists formulating an agenda for change with modes for resistance by the opposition. The Egyptian mobilization was carried out using social media networks like Twitter and Facebook. These were also used in the organization process. The protest started on January 25th with an unprecedented number of protesters. The protesters' agenda for change was the sacking of the government along with President Mubarak but the Mubarak-led government had another agenda for change. In the early morning of January 29, President Mubarak made what some described as a desperate attempt to cling to power in a televised speech to the nation in which he defiantly insisted that he would remain as president to protect the nation. During the speech, President Mubarak announced that he was dissolving the government and later that day, he appointed National Intelligence Chief Omar Suleiman as his Vice President, the first time anyone has held that office under Mubarak. He also appointed Civil Aviation Minister Ahmed Shafiq as Prime Minister. This agenda for change failed to calm the public anger (Sharp, 2011:7).

Huge crowds gathered on Tahrir Square in Cairo from January 25th 2011 chanted slogans and the displaying the soles of their shoes lifted with their hands and demanded leadership change; this process triggered similar protests in provincial cities and towns around Egypt. Young Egyptian professionals like Wael Ghonim, a google executive were useful in the framing of the Egyptian issues and subsequent mobilization. These young activists bonded together by social media network like Facebook and Twitter emerged as pace-setters and leaders and some bore the highest cost of participation. Oberschall (2010) has pointed out that in collective action mobilization, small groups of activists bonding in close knit social milieus emerge as pace-setters and leaders who bear the highest cost of participation in long campaigns and inspire a larger group of part-time activists (called "transitory teams") for short and low cost events (weekend demonstration), and an even larger sympathetic public (called a "conscience constituency") who contribute funding but are not exposed to any physical danger or risk of arrest. There are also others who Mancur Olson Jnr. (1971) refers to as 'free riders' He observed that because social movements advocate on behalf of large group (masses) and their goals are collective goals (legislation, reform, regime change), they are vulnerable to free rider i.e. those who expect the benefits but do not contribute to the cost of attaining the goals. Political figures like Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei; former head of the IAEA and leader of Egypt's National Association for Change, Mohammad Baltagi; Head of Muslim Brotherhood bloc of law makers from 2005 to 2010 whoho were not initially in the protest but joined later as leaders of the opposition in anticipation of benefiting from the process.

4. **Confrontation**: This is characterized by the tactics or strategic actions that the adversaries employed for reaching a favourable outcome. A pivotal variable of confrontation is violence because it is likely to change the issues, players, strategies, and other parameters of conflict. The confrontation of the Egyptian struggle in the centre of Cairo on Wednesday, February 2, 2011 was on live global television. Supporters of President Mubarak went on the offensive against opposition protestors in Tahrir (Liberation) square, and the army, while not deliberately hurting anti-government demonstrators did little to help them. In fact, the army had earlier called on protestors to leave the streets in an appeal for calm; a move some observers believe was really intended to deflate protestors' momentum (Sharp, 2011:11). Oberschall had argued that faced with disruption, the authorities are under pressure to restore orderly routines in daily life. The authorities' response becomes a new issue: If the authorities ban marches, it becomes a free speech or freedom of assembly issue for the banned group; if the authorities intervene coercively, they risk being accused of police brutality, protests to free those "unjustly" arrested and for punishing the police who "repressed" peaceful demonstrators become a new confrontation campaign (Oberschall, 2010:189). The Egyptian police had been accused of Police brutality prior to this unrest and so the use of police to intervene in this protest was avoided. As Doug McAdam (1983) once argued, a variety of tactics, both conventional politics and unconventional protest, are engaged in confrontation as the challengers and their adversaries test each other's strengths and weakness and the public response; the Egyptian government decided to withdraw the police from the streets of Egypt and in what appeared to be an orchestrated show of force, a huge crowd of pro-Mubarak strongmen, some riding on horses and camel, stormed Tahrir Square on Wednesday, Februrary 2, and attacked anti-government protesters with metal rods, stones, and sticks. A storm of stones rained down on both sides of the battle. Eyewitness' accounts from Egyptian and international journalists suggested that the attacker were made up of active supporters of the embattled President and a group known in Egypt as 'Baltagiya' or gangs. Some reports suggested that plainclothes police officers were among them (Sharp 2011:11). There are conflicting reports on the number of dead as a result of the confrontation but certainly lots of deaths were reported. The measures employed by the government to stem the protest became new issues for continued mass action. For example, the curfew, the killings and the attacks by gangs in support by Mubarak, all resulted in the escalation of the protest for a regime change.

5. **Outcomes**: At this level of analysis, the impact of collective action is measured or identified. Measures of success distinguish 'acceptance' (also called 'recognition') of the challengers from advantages gained (also 'goal achievement') (Oberschall, 1973:342-343). Acceptance is measured by the social movements elected or appointed officials in government, while advantages are clearly observed at the

short run as in changes in issues that resulted in collective action or a change in regime/government. In the long-run though, the measurement of advantages becomes relatively difficult, there was a form of recognition in the Egyptian collective action when the opposition figures were called for negotiation by the Mubarak-led government. The advantages in the short run were very obvious which includes the overthrow of government, constitutional reform; higher level of political participation etc.The long run advantages may include a better society and government performance in the economy. This is not as obvious as the short-run achievements. However, it is hard to say that the originators of the collective action are the beneficiaries of elected and appointed offices in the present Egyptian government as members of the Islamic Brotherhood who only joined the collective action later have been greater beneficiaries.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of conflict via the social movement approach has assisted us in the understanding of the dynamics of the Egyptian 2011 political crisis from the stage of Issue to that of Output as it stands today. While these categories may not be as distinct or mutually exclusive as presented, they all exist and help shape the social change and guide the cause of the collective action. The theory provides for the necessary developmental stages of a social conflict. It clearly pointed out how the Egyptian conflict developed from issues in the likes of frustration in the form and style of governance to framing along developmental needs and subsequent mobilizations to city centres like Tahrir square; then a coercive attempt to quell the protest which resulted in confrontation and finally, its outcome which includes a change of the Mubarak-led government. The Social movement and Collective action theory is appropriate for analysing social conflicts like that which occurred in Egypt. However, it has not been able to provide for the reason why the outcome of collective actions differs. There are elements inherent in collective actions that make one a success and the other a failure. It is important to factor into the Social movement and Collective action theory, the element of the kind of regime. How democratic or dictatorial is the regime? There is no doubt that these factors will determine if and how an issue will eventually develop through the categories. The subsequent Libyan and Syrian conflicts points to possible forms a collective action could degenerate to depending on the government.

Social movements and Collective actions could be very effective as a tool of socio-political depending on how democratic or dictatorial the government of that State is. A democratic State has the tendency to accommodate issues raised by its people which if not address could degenerate into conflict. This could be through negotiations, reversals of policies, constitutional amendments, increased representation and participation. A dictatorial government on the other hand tends to forcefully quell any contrary views or opposition. In a dictatorial State, Social movements and Collective actions have difficulty developing through these categories; they sometimes evolve into rebel groups or guerrilla fighters.

The future of the Social movement and Collective action theory as a tool of analysis is vivid and its potentials are immense but in keeping up with this enormous potentials and utility, it must be able to identify and apply the elements inherent in a regime and in a social movement that either ensures success or failure of a collective action.

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