Voices of the People

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The people referred to in this chapter are those citizens who want more say in what their rulers do and are not content with current political arrangements – even in the context of an existing democracy. Popular protests have been an issue in international relations for a very long time. An early example was the French Revolution of 1789 when the old order was overturned and replaced, at least for a while, with a popular, revolutionary government. Today, popular movements are not only growing in frequency but also in importance due to how they shape international relations. When considered alongside the availability of instant communication via the internet, as explored in the previous chapter, the phenomenon of ordinary people mobilising to bring about meaningful – and sometimes abrupt – political change raises important questions for IR about how change occurs at the domestic level and the wider implications of that change at regional and global levels.

Change in a globalising world

In today's world there are numerous examples of popular demand for political change. They generally arise at a time when politicians seem unable to deliver on their promises. Take, for example, the year 2008 – described by Amartya Sen (2009) as 'a year of crises'. First, there was a food crisis that impacted on poorer consumers, especially across African states, as the staples of their diet often became unaffordable. Second, there was a spike in oil prices that raised the cost of fuel and petroleum products globally. Finally, in the autumn of 2008, there was an economic crisis in the United States that quickly spread, compounding prior issues, and the global economy faltered. What does economic downturn have to do with the 'voices of people'? The answer lies in the newly interconnected nature of our world.

For the bulk of the world's population, daily life is characterised by easy and speedy communications. Of course, some areas of the developing world still suffer from poverty and infrastructure issues and so lack the benefits of global communications. That said, it is not uncommon to find mobile phones, which are ever cheaper, proliferating in the poorest regions of the world – such as across sub-Saharan Africa. Improved communications are a fundamental aspect of a wider phenomenon: globalisation. Globalisation enables us, via the communications revolution, to learn quickly and consistently about events all over the world, almost as soon as they happen. Globalisation has in a real sense shrunk the world and made it interactive. When something happens in one country, it can quickly affect others. This may be an economic matter, such as the global economic downturn referred to above, but terrorism is also an issue.

The era of deepening and sustained globalisation coincides with global events following the end of the Cold War. When the Soviet Union dissolved in the early 1990s it gave way to a range of newly independent post-communist states that redrew the map from central Europe to central Asia. Fifteen new states were created, including Russia. It also initiated a dynamic phase of globalisation which affected our understanding of international relations in a number of ways. First, the end of the Cold War threw the study of international relations into a state of flux. Soon after the Cold War ended, there was talk of a new international order. This reflected a widespread optimism that there could be improved international co-operation and a fresh commitment to strengthening key international organisations,

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especially the United Nations. The aim was to achieve various goals, including better, more equitable development; reducing gender inequalities; defusing armed conflicts; lessening human rights abuses, and tackling environmental degradation and destruction. In short, to manage multiple global interdependencies it would be necessary to improve processes of bargaining, negotiation and consensus-seeking, involving both states and various non-state actors, including the United Nations.

It soon became clear, however, that there was a lack of ideas as to how the desired international improvements might be achieved. During the 1990s there were serious outbreaks of international conflict. Many were religious, ethnic or nationalist conflicts that spilled over into neighbouring states. When these events occurred, local or national issues quickly spiralled into regional or international crises. Examples of these include conflicts in Africa – in Burundi, Haiti, Rwanda and Somalia – and also Europe, where Yugoslavia tore itself apart during the 1990s, eventually splitting into seven states. All these led to serious, and in many cases still unresolved, humanitarian crises requiring external intervention. These conflicts showed how difficult it is proving to move from the problems of the old international order that had characterised the Cold War to a new era marked by international peace, prosperity and cooperation.

'Colour' and 'umbrella' revolutions

Between 2000 and 2005, a series of popular protests, which later became known as 'colour revolutions', swept away authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes in Serbia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine. The common trigger for these revolutions was an attempt by leaders to falsify election results in their favour. Via various non-violent regime-change strategies, the protests sought to change political configurations in a democratic direction. The 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine was archetypical. In 2004–2005, the Orange Revolution – so called because this was the colour worn by many protesters to illustrate their solidarity – helped bring to power a pro-Western president, Viktor Yushchenko, who defeated his rival Viktor Yanukovych in a repeat run-off election. Protesters claimed that the integrity of the initial election, which Yanukovych 'won', was undermined by massive corruption, voter intimidation and direct electoral fraud. Subsequently, thousands of protesters demonstrated daily, in events characterised by widespread civil disobedience and labour strikes.

Events in Ukraine echoed wider examples of vote rigging, voter intimidation and electoral irregularities that characterised many countries in Central and Eastern Europe following the collapse of Communist governments in the 1990s. In addition, the colour revolutions demonstrated the increasing volatility of international relations, the spread of ideas and the associated demands by citizens for political and economic change. In some countries, the colour revolution swept away the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian regime. In others, it did not. Thus, the issue of the 'voices of the people' is not just about success but also failure and the causes of failure. Today's political and economic protests tend to have both longevity and wide ramifications. At the very least they change the relationship between ruled and rulers. If harnessed fully they can lead to profound political upheaval.

In other Central and Eastern European states, attempts to replicate successful strategies in the earlier colour revolutions, such as peaceful protests, public demands for democratisation, the use of election monitoring and post-election mass protests to contest fraudulent elections, failed. Moreover, in those states where no serious attempt to launch a colour revolution was made, governments took action to avoid the possibility of regime change by espousing policies sometimes referred to as 'anti-colour insurance'. For example, rulers in Russia, Belarus and Azerbaijan adopted strategies such as strongly attacking local, independent civil society and political activists as 'foreign agents', unfairly limiting electoral competition and portraying colour revolution ideas and techniques as subversive and alien to the country's culture and traditions. Thus, to understand why some protests succeeded and others failed, we need to take into account the ability of authoritarian regimes to prevent democratisation and significant economic reform. This amounted to the ability of the regimes to study democracy promotion techniques at the heart of protests and directly combat these techniques. As there was variation in activists' choice of strategies across the various protesting nations, rulers' responses also differed according to the perceived seriousness of the threat to regime survival and the regime's strength in relation to the opposition it faced.

Although not connected by geography, time or culture to the colour revolutions, Hong Kong's 'Umbrella Revolution' (also known as 'Occupy Central' and the 'Umbrella Movement') in 2014 similarly involved popular protests against

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authoritarian rule and lack of democracy. The name 'umbrella' refers to the fact that many activists held umbrellas as a symbol of protest during the events. Hong Kong is a semi-autonomous island territory and a former British colony. It passed from British to Chinese control in 1997 and part of the deal was that China would allow at least a measure of democracy to continue. China, of course, is ruled by a Communist government and is a one-party state that strictly limits political competition. Protesters believed that the Chinese government was going back on an agreement to allow Hong Kong to have open elections and was progressively governing Hong Kong more like mainland China. There were also underlying economic issues, with Hong Kong's citizens experiencing some of the highest levels of wealth and income inequality in the world. For several weeks, Hong Kong's ultra-modern business centre was transformed into a conflict zone, with up to 200,000 protestors confronted by police in riot gear. The protests eventually fizzled out, with the protesters not only failing to persuade the government of China to accede to their demands but also experiencing dwindling support as people grew tired of the disruption to their lives. As was the case in some Central and Eastern European countries, this highlights the ability of entrenched rulers to stay in power without making significant concessions. Yet it is also clear that the protests have had an impact on how many Hong Kong citizens view their political future. This may be significant in years to come as a large proportion of the protesters were students and young people.

Although separated by a decade, the colour and 'Umbrella' revolutions were both indicative of a wide sense of disconnection from power. When this is matched by an ability for people to use their voice to influence political and economic outcomes, mass action can quickly follow. Here, we can see the double-edged impact of globalisation at work. On the one hand, the end of the Cold War unleashed the forces of democratisation and economic reform that many authoritarian elites did their best to prevent – sometimes with success. On the other hand, ideas set free by the end of the Cold War found resonance in diverse cultural contexts and expression in the form of street protests that reflected the power of the voice of the people. In fact, so extensive was the spread of such thinking that even established democracies in the West were affected.

The Occupy movement

The United States is a country that allows its citizens full participation in politics – a place where the people determine the direction of the nation via their mass participation in elections. Such slogans as 'land of the free' and 'anyone can be president' come to mind. But, like many other similar political regimes it faces degenerating into a system that favours the rich. In the US today, the top one per cent of people are in receipt of 21 per cent of national income. Over time, this proportion has been changing for the worse. In the 1970s the top one per cent's income share was 'only' about 10 per cent. The issue became acute following the 2008 financial crisis, which laid bare the degree of inequality in American society and the lack of influence over public policy felt by the majority of the population (see Picketty 2014). Two million Americans lost their homes in the so-called 'sub-prime mortgage' collapse, which then spiralled into a much bigger crisis affecting the entire financial system. The US government bailed out some large corporations and banks to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars to prevent the whole financial system from collapsing. This was accompanied by austerity measures that eroded benefits and public services as the government had less money available due to the economic crash. This general pattern was also seen in other liberal economies, including the United Kingdom. Hence, a picture emerged in some circles that the government had given money to the richest and taken money from the poorest. The Occupy movement was a diffuse and diverse reaction to this perception. It was a reaction against the ineffectiveness of the traditional tools of democratic politics and government such as political parties, elections and lobbying.

The Occupy movement protested against Wall Street, home of the US financial industry, as a symbol of 'unearned' privilege and wealth – even though it was politicians who were coming up with and implementing austerity cuts. The movement began in Zuccotti Park, near Wall Street, on 17 September 2011. Critics noted the activists' lack of a clear set of demands and their tendency to only highlight grievances. However, a clear set of values did emerge:

- Solidarity – society's institutions should aim to maximise mutual benefits.
- Diversity – diverse solutions to pressing problems.
- Equity – in terms of solutions and distribution.
- Control – especially self-management, freedom and autonomy.

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Following the emergence of the Occupy movement, there were hundreds of similar occupations all over the world – though mainly in the United States and Western Europe. Years later, it remains clear that the problems that prompted these protests have not gone away. However, much of the energy has dissipated from the movement. This is partly because the protesters could not develop and articulate a common platform that would enable a clear pathway to action to be advanced (which would have been the priority of a political party or revolutionary movement). Instead, they just produced a slogan, 'We are the 99%', highlighting the growth of inequality since the 1970s that disproportionately affects women, young people and minorities. The Occupy movement splintered following the decision of the mayor of New York to break up the protest in November 2011. Without leaders or specific demands, it turned into an unfocused protest against everything that was 'wrong' with the world.

While the Occupy movement's social critique resonates with many people, the question remains whether it offers a practical and achievable means to accomplish goals. How best to mobilise people to alleviate poverty? Many would argue that action aimed at poverty alleviation – for example, building public housing projects or preventing cuts to food stamps – has to involve mainstream politics. Critics claim that the new generation of activists may have forgotten, abandoned or overlooked the progressive ideal of a reform-minded government raising up the poor and mitigating discrimination. What is clear is that the Occupy movement has given voice to concerns about systemic divisions in the economic and social structure in the United States and other Western states. These concerns have touched a nerve that continues to resonate – much like the aftermath of the Umbrella Revolution in Hong Kong. And, also like Hong Kong, the adverse reaction of certain political leaders and senior police officers suggested to some the hypocrisy of those with power. Post-2008, it is now common for politicians seeking election in the United States to profess their support for 'main street' rather than Wall Street as a means of rallying popular support.

The Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is a collective term for a series of political protests that began in late 2010 in Tunisia. Over the next few years, a number of countries saw their political situation greatly affected as protests broke out across the Middle East and North Africa against the corrupt and authoritarian leaders that were typical of the region. While Arab peoples live in very different states, the protesters were united by a feeling of alienation from political power. Despite this, it is unclear whether the Arab Spring events will lead to more democracy in the region. That is, there has been no uniformity in what subsequently occurred. In some cases, old dictators remain in power, while in others new leaders acquired power via the ballot box. In Egypt, things are more complex still as there have been several changes of power. What is clear is that rebellions occurred that have reshaped the region. Libya's Gaddafi regime was overthrown by rebels aided by international intervention in the form of a NATO bombing campaign. There were also major political upheavals in Syria and Yemen and smaller, though still noteworthy, expressions of dissent in other states such as Bahrain, Algeria and Morocco.

The events of the Arab Spring highlighted the importance of stability, security and regime longevity. They also directed attention to the prospects for democratisation and economic and social improvements for 'ordinary' citizens. The pressing question is whether governments can deal with the challenge of fast-growing populations demanding more jobs and improved welfare. This is almost certainly the key concern of the tens of thousands of people in the Middle East and North Africa who were active and vocal in the Arab Spring protests. Such people – like their counterparts elsewhere in the world – expect political change that improves their lives. However, while Arab peoples have been lumped together in accounts of the Arab Spring due to their apparently common political and economic plight, it is important to note that widespread divisions characterise the region. This involves conflict between different religious expressions, including intra-Muslim struggles (Iraq, Syria, Bahrain) and Muslim–Christian (Tunisia, Egypt) tensions. Despite the coming together of people of all faiths in the Arab Spring protests, sectarian tensions and conflict have followed. The stand-out case here is Syria, which in 2011 spiralled into a deeply polarising sectarian conflict that has since been fuelled by regional (Iran–Saudi Arabia) and also global (US–Russia) rivalries. The conflict has caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands and the displacement of millions. It represents the extreme edge of what was unleashed by the Arab Spring.

Not since the end of communism a generation ago has the role of religion in democratisation and post-authoritarian political arrangements been so centrally and consistently to the fore. The Middle East and North Africa are regions

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often characterised as places where religion – especially Islam – is a key component of demands for political and social change. However, it is not obvious what the role of religion has been in the Arab Spring. Across the Middle East and North Africa, identifiable religious actors have been, and continue to be, conspicuous in anti-authoritarian and pro-democratisation movements. But there appears to be no clear pattern in terms of outcomes related to democratisation. What we do know is that rebellions in Egypt and Tunisia unseated incumbent governments and initially ushered in recognisably democratic elections which, in both cases, Islamists won. Yet, we saw an apparent transition to a recognisably democratic regime only in Tunisia. In Egypt, the primary struggle was between democrats and non-democrats. Over time, this shifted to a fight between secularists and the Islamists who had triumphed in a popular election. As things became polarised the military felt emboldened to crack down on the Islamists, who were perceived by the secularists as following a more extreme version of political Islam than was tolerable for Egyptian society at large. Eventually, the elected president Mohamed Morsi was ousted from power in a coup led by military chief Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Sisi was subsequently elected as president via the ballot box in June 2014, receiving a popular mandate.

Overall, evidence suggests that the likelihood of the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa taking a clear path to democratisation is currently poor and the chances of widespread democratic consolidation still worse. In this midst of the picture is the serious proliferation of transnational terrorism that is explored in the next chapter. The unwelcome but most likely outcome is a gradual slide into entrenched and long-term political instability culminating in some cases in state failure, with serious ramifications for regional and international instability. The plight of Syria is a worrying case in point. In this context, the voices of the people of the Arab Spring can be seen to have had a very mixed set of results.

Conclusion

The aim of the chapter was to show how, in various parts of the world, the voices of ordinary people – intensified and encouraged by globalisation and the attendant communications revolution – challenged the status quo. In some cases this resulted in significant regime change; in others, rulers were able to hang on to power. While the picture may appear more gloomy than cheerful in terms of evidence of change, it is important to understand that none of the examples of the protests covered in this chapter are definitively concluded. Unlike earlier revolutions – for example, those in France, Russia and China, all of which ushered in definitive regime changes – none of the examples covered in this chapter amount to clear-cut jumps from one political system to another. What we can observe is the connectedness and shared ideas that collectively characterise today's popular protests. We can expect to see more such protests in the years to come as people across the world raise their voices and demand change

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