One of the principal chants that was raised during the Egyptian uprising of 2011 was *aish, huriyya, karama insaniyya*, or ‘bread, freedom, human dignity’. This slogan encapsulated the three primary collective action frames that activists employed during the uprising. I argue that these frames were drawn from, and engaged with, three broad themes in Egypt’s political discourse that had been developed over the previous decade: poor economic conditions, lack of democracy, and police abuse.

Keywords  
Egypt; framing; discourse; mobilisation
the streets, in public statements made by prominent intellectuals, in newspaper articles and posts on blogs, Twitter, and Facebook, in pamphlets and posters, and as graffiti and street art spray-painted on walls.

Though protesting had become increasingly common in the decade before the uprising, the slogan *aish, huriyya, karama insaniyya* had never been heard in Egypt’s streets before. How did the activists who called for the January 25 protest arrive at this synthesis of collective action frames? And how can we explain these three frames’ power in mobilising people into action? I argue that the activists who produced and disseminated the uprising’s core frames drew from, and engaged with, a rich and multidimensional political discourse, whose symbols, meanings, and vocabularies had evolved since the 1990s to include three broad themes – the need to improve Egypt’s dire economic situation, the need to establish democratic political structures, and the need to end police abuse. At some point during the decade before the uprising, each of these themes had been embraced, elaborated, and propagated by various social movements and political campaigns within Egyptian society. In explaining why Egyptian activists chose the frames they did and why those frames proved to be so resonant, I trace the development of each of these discursive themes, discussing the contexts out of which they emerged and how they were articulated.

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injustices and assign blame by identifying their source. Likewise they must suggest ‘prognostic frames’ that articulate a solution to their grievances and ‘motivational frames’ that provide a rationale for engaging in collective action (Snow and Benford, 1988, 2000a). In articulating these frames, activists must be attentive to the kinds of language they use, to the events and experiences that they emphasise, and to the narratives that they construct, so that their frames will have maximal coherence. Additionally, they must endeavor to give their frames resonance by couching them in prevailing meanings, ideologies, myths, values, and beliefs.

The framing literature has come under criticism for the way in which it deals with the question of culture and discourse (Swidler, 1995; Hart, 1996; Jasper, 1997; Williams and Kubal, 1999; Goodwin and Jasper, 1999, 2004; Goodwin et al., 2001). These critics argue that frame analysis tends to ‘reify culture’ by conceiving it as a distinct social sphere that social movements must ‘make sense of’ through their framing processes. They point out that social movements engage recursively with prevailing culture, both drawing on existing cultural meanings and producing new meanings through the frames they create. Culture provides a ‘stock’ of beliefs, meaning, values, narratives, and themes that both constrain movement activists in the frames they can produce, but also offer them an array of discursive resources on which they might draw in their frame development efforts. One of these scholars, Marc Steinberg (1995, 1998), draws attention to the importance of prevailing discourses and their relationship to frames. He argues that discourses ‘bound the set of meanings through which challengers can articulate claims’ (1995: 48). A similar argument has been made about the relationship between frames and ideology, which are seen as both constraints on, and resources for, activists in their framing efforts (Oliver and Johnston, 2000; Snow and Benford, 2000b).

Whether one speaks of culture, discourse, or ideology, the point is that social movements must engage dialogically and interactively with the prevailing meanings of their society as they develop their collective action frames.

As this literature would predict, framing processes were integral to the Egyptian uprising. Many of the activists who organised the initial days of protest noted the time and energy they devoted to developing effective slogans and calls to action. Moreover, the way they talked about their framing efforts reflects the literature’s emphasis on the strategic facets of frame construction processes. For example, Walid Rashed, a leader from the 6 April Youth movement, described how his group tried to ‘market’ their ideas to regular Egyptians: ‘They were our customers. And we were the salespeople. And the idea of change is the product that has to be sold. I’m dealing with any idea as a product’.²

Other scholars have called attention to the efforts of Egypt’s activists to construct compelling frames during and before the uprising, and the important role those frames played in mobilising broad participation (Alexander, 2011; Alterman, 2011; Bayat, 2011; Hamzawy, 2011; Hirschkind, 2011). Some have noted that the protests were successful, in part, because activists for the first time were able to convert economic grievances into political demands (Alterman, 2011; Hamzawy, 2011). In a slightly different
vein, Jeffrey Alexander (2011) has highlighted the performative nature of the uprising. He argues that activists drew up compelling scripts and projected powerful symbols that imbued the events with enough meaning and cultural power to encourage masses of people to participate in the performance. Finally, Charles Hirschkind (2011) and Asef Bayat (2011) have both argued that the demands of the revolution were drawn from a particular kind of political discourse that bridged the long-standing divide between secular and Islamist forces in Egyptian politics. All of these works are noteworthy for calling attention to the framing processes at work during the Egyptian uprising, but none of them systematically account for how the different frames were developed, nor how they related to the prevailing cultural symbols and discursive themes in the Egyptian public sphere.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION: THE POST-ISLAMIST CONSENSUS

Before elaborating on the specific frames that shaped the uprising, I first explore some of the changes that occurred in Egypt’s political discourse in the late 1990s and early 2000s that provided an intellectual foundation upon which activists later built their particular campaigns. During these years, a political current, later termed ‘post-Islamism’, began to emerge in the Egyptian public sphere (Bayat, 2007; Kepel, 2002; Roy, 1994, 2004). Though debatably its legacy as a political project has been limited, I argue that post-Islamism had an important impact on Egypt’s political discourse, providing new possibilities for cross-ideological collaboration and consensus-building that were critical for the formulation of future political campaigns. The innovations of post-Islamist thinkers provided Egypt’s political class with a bedrock of concerns and ideas that appealed to Egyptians of many ideological currents. Many of the movements that emerged later in the decade adopted this post-Islamist vocabulary in their campaigns, making it an important intellectual precursor to the three collective action frames that motivated the uprising.

The first manifestations of post-Islamism emerged in the mid-1990s, as a collection of Islamist thinkers in Egypt, and the rest of the Arab world, began to reexamine the relationship between Islamist thought and classic ‘liberal’ ideas like democracy, rights, and justice. They argued that liberalism and Islamism were not as fundamentally incompatible as both currents claimed, and that Islamic ideas had the potential to be reinterpreted to support more liberal causes. They appropriated concepts like human rights, social justice, democratic government, and freedom of expression, and couched them in Islamic terms. Though their project was not particularly radical, and the term ‘post-Islamist’ – with its connotations of rupture and breaking with the past – was only applied by others and after the fact, the innovations of these thinkers did represent something fresh in the Egyptian public sphere, which had traditionally been marked by ideological polarisation. By seeking to accommodate Islamist thought with ideas normally championed by liberals and secularists, the post-Islamists created a political language that offered new potential for cross-partisan collaboration and coalitional political initiatives.

There were two primary sources of post-Islamist thought in Egypt in the 1990s, one intellectual and the other largely political. The former was centered on a group of moderate Islamist writers, journalists, and scholars, which included individuals like Yusuf al-Qaradawi, Tariq al-Bishri, Muhammad ‘Imara, Muhammad Salim al-Awwa, Fahmy Howeidy, and Abdel Wahhab al-Messiri. Though these
thinkers were not part of any formal group, they did represent a relatively coherent and unified school of thought, which Raymond Baker (2003) has described as the ‘Wasatiyya’ (or ‘centrist’) school. Their ideological innovations occurred in parallel to a political project launched by a collection of moderate Muslim Brotherhood members who had grown disillusioned with the Brothers’ ideological inflexibility. These disillusioned MB leaders decided to split with the organisation and founded their own political party, called Al-Wasat (‘The Centre’) (Stacher, 2002; Wickham, 2004). According to Abu el-Ela Madi, the party’s founder, the leaders wanted ‘to present a new way of moderate Islamic thinking, which would accept cooperation with others, which would accept full democracy, and which would accept the rotation of political power’. The party articulated a moderate platform that embraced principles based on democracy, Shari’a, and human rights, and drew on the ideas of the Wasatiyya thinkers.

In parallel to these shifts in Islamist thinking, Egypt also witnessed some moderation in other political currents during the 1990s. Many members of the leftist Tagammu Party had become disillusioned by the party’s kowtowing to regime demands and began defecting to leftist NGOs, and to an underground Trotskyite movement called the Revolutionary Socialists. Likewise, the Nasserist Party lost a number of prominent members to a splinter party called Karama (‘Dignity’), which resembled the Wasat in its calls for moderation and cross-ideological cooperation. These new political groups began meeting and discussing questions of reform in a variety of conferences, seminars, and informal meetings, eventually developing a shared political language based largely on post-Islamist innovations (el-Ghobashy, 2005).

By the early 2000s, these groups had sufficiently bridged the ideological gaps between them to begin working together on joint political initiatives. When the second Palestinian Intifada broke out in 2000, the reformist wings of the Islamist and leftist camps formed the Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada, which organised a variety of charity events, press conferences, and political demonstrations designed to show solidarity with the Palestinians (el-Hamalawy, 2007; Abdelrahman, 2009). In 2002 and 2003, when it became increasingly clear that the United States was preparing to invade Iraq, the same committee began organising events to oppose the war. Throughout these activities, the various political groups negotiated and debated fiercely over what kinds of demands would be mutually acceptable. Though foreign issues provided more common ground than domestic ones, disputes still erupted frequently. As Adel El-Mashad, a leftist and founding member of the Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada said:

Within the Committee itself there are [Islamist] sympathies ... And so there has been conflict on the position to take regarding several issues, and at the end of the day we chose to disagree and not issue a position ... Many international movements – such as the anti-globalisation movement – face this quandary. Either to limit their ranks to like-minded people, or to open up and incorporate all different views and live with that difference. We have chosen the second option, and we feel that it is more productive, even if on certain issues we are unable to take a collective stand. Al Ahram Weekly (2002)

As El-Mashad points out, the groups managed their differences by avoiding divisive issues and focusing on areas of common ground. Eventually what emerged from these debates was a discourse oriented mostly around human rights, though with heavy condemnation.
of Zionism and US neo-imperialism as well.

The campaigns around the Iraq War and the Intifada did not reconcile all, or even most, of the differences between Islamists and secularists. Instead, they offered forums for debate, in which areas of limited common ground were built upon and entrenched in the political discourse of the opposition. Though post-Islamist movements like the Wasat Party ultimately went on to have a limited impact on Egypt’s political terrain, their contributions to Egypt’s political culture may have been much greater. By opening the door to cross-partisan dialogue and couching concepts in terms that could be accepted by many currents, they took the first steps toward developing a political discourse that could be a source of mobilisation for Egyptians of many ideological orientations.

**HURIYYA: THE KEFAYA MOVEMENT**

The dialogue between different political groups that had begun during the 1990s and intensified during the activities around the Intifada and the Iraq War, took a critical turn in 2004 with the foundation of the Egyptian Movement for Change, more commonly known by its popular slogan – ‘Kefaya’ (‘Enough’). The Kefaya movement was led by a coalition of diverse political forces, whose heated debating produced a rhetoric that was broad and inclusive enough to unite them toward a common end. The programme they championed built squarely on the post-Islamist discourse of the Wasat Party and other moderate Islamists, with a heavy emphasis on democracy, freedoms, human rights, and the nebulous concept of ‘change’. It was deliberately uncontroversial, designed to draw in as many political forces as possible to create a broad, cross-ideological front in opposition to the Mubarak regime. Not only was it the first political force in Egypt to construct such an inclusive rhetoric, but it was also bolder than any opposition campaign before it, in directly calling for the President to step down (el-Mahdi, 2009; Clarke, 2011).

The Kefaya movement’s genesis can be traced to an Iftar dinner in November 2003 hosted by the founder of the Wasat Party, Abu el-Ela Madi. Several dozen prominent Egyptian intellectuals were in attendance and the group spent the evening discussing the political situation in Egypt at the time. Many of the guests had been active leaders in the Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Palestinian Intifada and they were drawn primarily from those groups that had emerged in the 1990s as reformist offshoots of the mainstream political currents. For example, the Karama Party was well represented, as were the Revolutionary Socialists and a number of prominent leftist members of the human rights community. The Wasat Party’s founder was the host, and a number of the more reformist MB members were also present. The participants were united in their anger and disillusionment over the Mubarak regime’s perpetual resistance to democratic reforms or to allowing other political groups to have a voice. Moreover, at the time it was becoming apparent that Mubarak was trying to position his son, Gamal Mubarak, to become his successor. The guests at Madi’s Iftar lamented these developments and, after debating what course they might take, appointed six individuals from each major political current to draft a document that would express their shared desire for change. These six individuals took seven months to draft a two-page document that was acceptable to all the political groups that had been represented at the Iftar. The manifesto was repeatedly amended and tweaked; for example, some groups insisted on including
demands against foreign powers like Israel and the United States, as well as demands against the Mubarak regime, thus rehearsing some of the same themes that had been prominent in the debates of the preceding three years. According to Amin Iskander, one of the drafters and a leader in the Karama Party, he and his colleagues knew that the ideas ‘had to be simple and at the same time have a wide and comprehensive scope’.6 They settled on ‘democracy’ as the overarching theme, articulating an array of demands that would all lead to greater political freedom. ‘Democracy’ had two major advantages: it avoided the question of economic reform, a divisive topic over which the different groups disagreed, and it drew on the work of post-Islamist thinkers who had already made great strides in connecting the idea of democracy to Islamist thought. As Ahmed Baha’a Shaaban, a communist and the document’s chief writer put it:

*We refused all points that would lead to disagreement ... The main point was democracy. And we found that any other point would destroy this unity; because we had Islamists, and communists, and nationalists. And everyone had their own main idea. But we all came together over the idea of democracy.*⁷

As such, the document stated that the chief domestic problem plaguing modern Egypt was: ‘the repressive despotism that pervades all aspects of the Egyptian political system and want for democratic governance’. It went on to articulate four ‘concrete steps on our route to democracy and progress:

1. Breaking the hold of the ruling party on power and all its instruments;
2. Cessation of the Emergency Law now in effect for a full quarter century;
3. Cessation of all laws which constrain public and individual freedoms; and
4. Effecting constitutional reform’⁸

The document then proposed seven amendments to the constitution designed to limit the powers of the President, create a genuine democratic process, and enforce freedoms of expression and association. The drafters solicited endorsement signatures from 300 prominent intellectuals and leaders from across the political spectrum. They then held a conference in September 2004, at which the manifesto was released. After some debate and discussion, the conference participants decided to form a movement called ‘The Egyptian Movement for Change’ to pressure the Mubarak regime into implementing their demands.

The Kefaya movement held its first demonstration in December 2004. Activists stood silently on the steps of the Egyptian Supreme Court with yellow stickers bearing the word ‘Kefaya’ emblazoned across their mouths and chests, a metaphor for the regime’s silencing of political opposition. In the months that followed, its demonstrations came to be a prominent feature of Egypt’s political landscape. During this time, the Kefaya activists honed their message, developing a series of catchy slogans and compelling frames designed to demonstrate the regime’s hypocrisy, point out the need for democratic reforms, and denounce the continuation of Mubarak’s presidency. Indeed, although the manifesto itself did not call for Mubarak to step down, ‘yasqut, yasqut, Hosni Mubarak’ (‘down, down, with Hosni Mubarak’) became one of their most popular chants. ‘La li tamdid, la li tawrith’ (‘no to extension, no to succession’) was another common slogan, which denounced Mubarak’s plan to pass on power to his son, as was the ‘kefaya’ chant itself, in which a leader would call out a number of grievances (‘corruption!’ ‘Emergency law!’ ‘Hosni Mubarak’) and the crowd would shout back ‘kefaya!’ (‘enough!’). Kefaya also cultivated relationships with prominent thinkers and intellectuals who had
previously articulated moderate or post-Islamist political ideas. For example, its leadership was close to Tariq al-Bishri, a judge and prominent Islamist thinker from the ‘Wasatiyya’ stream of thought, who they considered nominating as a Kefaya candidate for president. They also selected Abdel Wahhab al-Messiri, another Wasatiyya thinker, as their second general coordinator.

Another important part of Kefaya’s discourse was its emphasis on individual citizenship, rather than political parties and ideology. Indeed, the manifesto begins by stating that ‘we, the undersigned, are citizens of Egypt’ therefore presenting the signatories as individual citizens, rather than representatives of political currents. Moreover, Kefaya’s leadership insisted that its members join ‘as individuals’ rather than as representatives of particular groups, and they refused to allow NGOs or political parties to join as organisations. Though in reality many members did come to the movement representing their parties’ or factions’ points of view, the movement’s official position was that it was simply a coalition of concerned Egyptian citizens. This emphasis on individualism and citizenship also granted the necessary space for many younger Kefaya members, who were often new to politics, to craft variegated political identities.

Kefaya’s activities diminished significantly after the end of 2005 and, though the movement’s leadership continued to meet, it largely disappeared from the political scene in Egypt. But although the movement withered away, its discourse of democracy, citizenship, and freedom endured, as myriad successive campaigns, projects, and movements embraced its demands and ideas. For example, the Egyptian blogosphere became an important arena in the aftermath of Kefaya for continuing the political conversations that the movement had started, further honing its democratic rhetoric (Hirschkind, 2011; Lynch, 2007a, b). A wave of judges’ protests in 2006 employed some of Kefaya’s most successful frames, while also including a series of specific demands regarding judicial and constitutional reform. When Mohammed el-Baradei, the former director of the International Atomic Energy Agency and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, returned to Egypt in 2010, he formed an organisation called the National Association for Change, which included many former Kefaya members and adopted much of the movement’s democratic language. For example, its first public statement was titled ‘A statement of the Egyptian movement for free and sound elections based on the comments of Mohammed el-Baradei’. The statement goes on to articulate five demands targeted at ensuring fair parliamentary elections at the end of 2010: amending the constitution, abolishing the Emergency Law, preparing new election schedules, and allowing international monitors and independent judicial monitors. This same kind of inclusive political discourse was also, of course, a crucial theme in the rhetoric of the Egyptian uprising. ‘Yasqut Mubarak’ was among the most popular chants during the protests, and freedom, democracy and citizenship, were widely deployed frames. Activists drew heavily on the political discourse that Kefaya had developed, not only because it articulated well the political demands that they hoped to achieve, but also because it had already proven successful in drawing together diverse ideological currents.

Critics of the Kefaya movement argued that its high political demands were not appropriate for mobilising a mass
movement. Kefaya was accused of speaking only to a small audience of educated, middle-class, urban intellectuals and politicians who alone represented a very small fraction of the Egyptian population. However, at about the same time as Kefaya’s activities, a far more populist and grass-roots kind of mobilisation was beginning to generate momentum. From 2004 to 2008, 1.7 million Egyptian workers engaged in more than 1,900 strikes and demonstrations, airing an array of demands and grievances related to their poor working conditions, including low wages, few collective bargaining rights, privatisation of government-owned businesses, and a lack of job security (Beinin, 2010). Though their activities were not coordinated by any formal social movement organisation, workers’ groups, based in different factories and cities, built on each others’ momentum, sharing and exchanging strategies, tactics, demands, and slogans. They also had no formal ties to the Kefaya movement, though they appropriated some of Kefaya’s frames and repertoires and were inspired by its example. As Kemal Abu Eita, a labour activist, Kefaya member, and Karama Party leader explained:

[Kefaya] helped in terms of the context that it created. People found a power in society that went down in the street and said: ‘Down, Down, Hosni Mubarak’. This destroyed the barrier of fear. It facilitated the idea of demonstrating or sit-ins or strikes and made it easier. It broke this image of the government as impenetrable and all-powerful.12

The workers’ strikes also effected a shift in the political conversation, away from the high demands of democracy and citizenship and towards the more material issues of food prices, low wages, unemployment, and a lack of basic services.

The context for this wave of worker mobilisation was a series of economic reforms initiated by the government of Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif, who was appointed by Mubarak in 2004. Spurred on by Gamal Mubarak and a cohort of business-oriented NDP leaders, the Nazif government enacted a wave of neoliberal reforms, including the privatisation of many state-owned companies and the erosion of worker protections, designed to encourage more foreign-direct-investment. Workers reacted angrily to these changes. The first major strike occurred in October 2004 at the ESCO Spinning Company in Qalqubiya, north of Cairo, as workers responded to the sale of the company from the state to a private Egyptian investor, demanding that their jobs remain secure. The biggest strikes erupted in December 2006, and then again in September 2007, at the massive Misr Spinning and Weaving Company in the working class town of Mahalla al-Kubra. The strike in Mahalla inspired workers in other sectors to demand their economic rights, and the annual number of strikes, gatherings, sit-ins, and demonstrations rose from between 200 and 270 a year during 2004, 2005, and 2006, to over 600 in 2008 (Beinin, 2011). Though most of these strikes were over local economic grievances that plagued a specific group of workers, sometimes the demands or chants would spill over into the realm of national politics; for example, at one strike in Mahalla al-Kubra, workers pulled down and desecrated a poster of Hosni Mubarak.

Beginning in 2007, striking began to spread from blue-collar industries like textiles, sanitation, and building materials, to white-collar sectors of the economy that were mostly controlled by the state. In the most famous example, the country’s municipal tax collectors held strikes through 2007 and 2008 until they were granted first a 325 per cent increase in their wage (commensurate with their colleagues employed directly by the Ministry of Finance) and then
their own independent trade union (i.e., separate from the state-controlled Egyptian Trade Union Federation). The success of the tax collectors, and their ability to mobilise a broad network of employees, prompted some labour leaders to launch a national minimum wage campaign, demanding that the government set a minimum wage level of EG£1,200 a month. In 2010 the government responded by raising the minimum wage to EG£400, a wholly inadequate level but still a significant achievement for the movement.

The workers’ movement was also inspiring to many young middle-class activists in Cairo and Alexandria who had participated in Kefaya but had become disillusioned with its elitist orientation and internal politicking. In 2008, Ahmed Maher, a young engineer who had been involved in Kefaya’s youth wing, Youth for Change, established a group on Facebook called the 6 April Youth. Maher, and his co-founders, believed that the workers’ movement proved that political demands like freedom and democracy were too abstract to affect normal Egyptians. They believed that economic frames, related to the difficult conditions in which everyday Egyptians lived, would be superior for generating genuine popular mobilisation. In 2007, they tried to link up with the striking workers groups and rally Egypt’s middle-class youth behind their cause. Then in 2008 they formed their Facebook group and named it after a strike that had been called on April 6, 2008 in Mahalla al-Kubra to support the campaign for a national minimum wage. Maher and his colleagues adopted the date as the name for their movement in order to demonstrate their affinity with and support for the workers and their demands.

In explaining the motivation for forming the 6 April Youth group, Maher said that he had come to realise the need to establish a political movement with a more populist bent than Kefaya, though using some of the same language about rights and freedom:

We planned to use the same kind of organization [as Youth for Change], but not the same goals. In Youth for Change the goal was ‘change Mubarak’. In the 6 April movement the goal is to change Mubarak and help the people ... So we brought together political, economic, and social demands as one ... In 2005, Kefaya talked only about political things: government, and Mubarak, and the constitution. But the people in the streets don’t care. They just want food and a home to sleep in. Nothing else. Now all of the parties and political movements are in agreement that the way to change Mubarak is through economic and social language. We must make the link to the people and the street. We must make the link between economic and political demands. We must say that ‘freedom is bread’. You can’t get bread because we don’t have freedom or democracy.13

Maher points out that, at the time, most of the political opposition agreed that embracing the demands and language of the workers’ movement was crucial to effecting real political change. Though Kefaya had attempted some limited outreach to workers in 2005, the 6 April Youth tried to build bridges with workers by organising protests and other political events in solidarity with actions already scheduled by labour groups. They couched these events in demands that echoed those of the workers and called attention to the widespread economic suffering of the Egyptian people. For example, in the group’s Facebook announcement for their strike to commemorate the one year anniversary of the April 6, 2008 protests in Mahalla, they used language addressed directly to various groups and constituencies whom they believed were aggrieved by material hardships: ‘to the people of Mahalla,
champions of Egypt ... to all the slum dwellers of Egypt ... to every unemployed youth ... to every employee who doesn’t make a living wage ... to every free and honorable Egyptian suffering from injustice and corruption'.14 Their announcement ended: ‘our broad demands affect all the people: minimum wages tied to prices, regulation of the market, and the prevention of monopoly’.14 At their conferences in Cairo, they brought workers from Mahalla al-Kubra to address their members and played videos of the Mahalla sit-in.15 Though it never managed to build the kind of durable connections with labour activists that it sought, the 6 April Youth embraced the language of the workers’ movement and tried to connect it to the political rhetoric of the Kefaya movement. As one protestor and leftist activist put it: ‘There was always a resonance between the workers demands and the activists’ political demands ... But this resonance had to be built over the years.’16 Such efforts at bridging these two discursive themes were crucial in giving these activists the experience to develop effective frames when it came time to plan the January 25, 2011 protest.

KARAMA INSANIYYA: WE ARE ALL KHALED SAID

On June 6, 2010 two police officers entered an Internet café in Alexandria and dragged a young man called Khaled Said out the door, hitting him and beating him. They smashed his head against a marble table and beat him so badly that they fractured his skull and killed him. Their actions were retaliation for a video that Said had uploaded on the Internet of the two police officers conducting a drug deal. Later the same day a photo of Said’s face, broken and distorted from the beating, began circulating on the Internet and the Egyptian blogosphere.17 Though most Egyptians knew that torture and police abuse were common practices, rarely did hard evidence ever emerge of it having taken place, especially not to a young, middle-class individual like Khaled Said.

Many Egyptians were outraged by the Khaled Said incident and they became even more incensed when the Ministry of Interior tried to cover up the officers’ crime by claiming that Said had died from swallowing a bag of hashish. There was an immediate and fierce response from the Egyptian activist community, which organised a number of protests in the weeks afterwards, calling Khaled Said a martyr, denouncing Habib al-Adly, the then-Interior Minister, and demanding an end to the Emergency Law. About 1,000 people showed up at Khaled Said’s funeral to demonstrate. Then on June 12 and June 13 the 6 April Youth organised protests in front of the Interior Ministry at which demonstrators chanted ‘yasqut, yasqut, ya Habib’ (‘down, down, with Habib [al-Adly]’).18 The biggest event took place on June 25, when Mohammed el-Baradei, the former IAEA chief, led his first street protest since returning to Egypt earlier that year. The event attracted over 4,000 people and the chants were mostly aimed at the police and the Interior Ministry, though some did call for an end to Mubarak’s reign as well.

Perhaps the most lasting impact of Khaled Said’s death was the creation of a page on the social networking site Facebook called ‘We Are Khaled Said’, which began posting videos, pictures, articles, and notes commemorating Khaled Said, pointing out other instances of police abuse, and calling for reform of the Interior Ministry and the police forces. The language of the Facebook page, which was created by Wael Ghoneim, a young marketing executive working for Google in Dubai, was not as confrontational or overtly political as Kefaya’s, or even the 6 April Youth’s, had been. Ahmed Maher remembered noting this moderate tone when he and his colleagues first discovered
the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ page: ‘he had a different kind of language from us. We were more aggressive, against Mubarak and the regime. But on the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ page it was more about human rights’. Muhammed Adel, Maher’s 6 April colleague, added that, ‘Wael Ghoneim and the Khaled Said group didn’t want to criticise Mubarak directly’. The page focused on police abuse, torture, and the unchecked power of the Mubarak state’s security apparatus; it didn’t talk about high political issues or call for democracy. Moreover, as Ahmed Maher correctly pointed out, though many of the grievances aired by the Khaled Said page could be labeled human rights abuses, the page generally avoided the discourse of human rights. Instead it couched its grievances in the more visceral language of state violence, as manifested in its various security institutions. For example, here is the group’s English translation of what they stand for:

Khaled Said, 28 years old, was tortured to death by 2 Egyptian Policemen in the street. The incident has woken up Egyptians to work against the systematic torture in Egypt and the 30 years running Emergency Law. We need international supporters to help us stand against Police brutality in Egypt.

This deliberate rejection of the more elite language of rights and humanitarianism was an important source of the Facebook’s page’s popularity among regular Egyptians.

Another noteworthy facet of the page’s discourse was that it spoke the same language of individual citizenship that had been prominent during the days of Kefaya. The first post, introducing the page, began as follows: ‘I am Egyptian, and will never accept the killing of Khaled by torture ... I am Egyptian and will not let the blood of this youth be in vain. I am Egyptian; like me, like Khaled’. The emphasis is on the shared civic membership of both Khaled and the writer (who at that point was anonymous) in the Egyptian nation. This shared membership provided the basis for a particular kind of individual human dignity, which was another common theme on the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ page. Take, for example, this statement, released on June 16, calling for participation in an upcoming demonstration: ‘[we] express solidarity with the family of the martyr and our desire to oppose these inhuman practices carried out by some members of the police ... who forgot that their role was to protect the dignity and freedom of the Egyptian citizens’. Here dignity is derived not so much from humanist notions of intrinsic rights, as it is in the traditional discourse of liberal humanism, but from a civic national identity that is shared by all Egyptian citizens. This idea of individual dignity tied to Egyptians’ national identity was also a widely deployed frame during the Egyptian uprising.

The rhetoric of the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ page was particularly appealing to middle-class young people who had never been involved or interested in politics. Though other activists throughout the decade had pointed to the problems of police abuse and torture, their language, which was conspicuously political in tone, had failed to generate the same level of outrage as did the Khaled Said page. Wael Abbas, whose blog, al-Wa’iy al-Masry, was one of the first to take up this kind of activist blogging, described how both the class position of Khaled Said himself, and the language used on the Facebook page, contributed to its success in generating sympathy from a new demographic group of Egyptians:

[The Khaled Said page] had good marketing because they had Wael Ghoneim and they had the sympathy of the people. Because I was covering violations of thieves and microbus
drivers and people from the lower classes, but Khaled Said was a symbol of the middle class. And for the first time the middle class has woken up because one of them was subject to police brutality ... The Khaled Said group didn’t appear as though it was an activist group, or people with a political purpose or an ideology or an agenda behind them. They were defending a young guy who was killed by the police. So a lot of people identified with them because they found that they did not have anything behind it.24

Wael Ghoneim’s unique innovation was his ability to talk about the visceral grievance of police brutality without getting bogged down in political ideologies or elite human rights rhetoric; his focus was narrow and pure, and this was a crucial source of his appeal. Through his Facebook page he introduced a new kind of discourse to the Egyptian public sphere, which ultimately formed the basis for the third collective action frame that was employed during the uprising.

JANUARY 25, 2011

At the end of December 2010, Ahmed Maher created a Facebook event for a day of protest on 25 January 2011 to protest against the brutality of the Egyptian police and call for the resignation of the Interior Minister and the end to Emergency Law.25 January 25 was an annual national holiday to celebrate the Egyptian police, and for the past two years the 6 April Youth had called for similar protests on that day to point out the irony of celebrating a police force that systematically abused its citizens. These past protest attempts had been failures; few people had shown up and the security forces had handily shut them down. However, in the days following the creation of the event page, a young fruit vendor called Muhammad Bouazizi from a small town in Tunisia lit himself on fire in frustration with Tunisia’s rampant corruption and poverty. The uprising that Bouazizi set off culminated with the departure of Tunisia’s president, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, for Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011. Maher and his colleagues were energised by the example; he recalled his exchanges at the time with Wael Ghoneim, who was helping him to plan and publicise the Police Day protest: ‘I received an email from Khaled Said [Wael Ghoneim] and he said to me that he had another idea. We needed to make the protest not for Police Day only, but make it an anger day against corruption, and torture, and bad salaries’.25 The plan had originally been to make the protest only about the police and to connect it to the momentum that the Khaled Said incident had created. But with Tunisia’s revolt now standing as an example, the organisers decided to enlarge the scope of the event and include a number of additional frames.

In crafting these frames, the planners of the 25 January 2011 protest drew from what was, by that point, a rich stock of available images, chants, narratives, and ideas from the three discursive themes that had been developed over the previous years. They adopted elements of Kefaya’s language and emphasised freedom, democracy, and citizenship. They reformulated the demands of the workers’ movement, which had already inspired much of the 6 April Youth’s rhetoric, and denounced poverty, unemployment, high prices, and corruption. And they built on the momentum that had been generated by the ‘We Are All Khaled Said’ Facebook page, condemning torture, police abuse, and the Emergency Law. The Facebook page that provided details for the January 25 protest included four core demands: (1) to address the problem of poverty, institute a minimum wage, and help university graduates find jobs, (2) to abolish the Emergency Law...
and end the practice of torture by the police, (3) to dismiss Habib el-Adly, the Interior Minister, and (4) to limit the President to two terms in office and to give the people the right to choose him. The activists synthesised these demands into a single slogan – ‘aish, huriyya, karama insaniyya,’ – which they displayed on their Facebook page at the top of their list of agreed-upon chants. Similar demands were written on paper and virtual leaflets, which were then disseminated through email and physical pamphleteering campaigns in the days preceding the uprising. The leaders gave interviews on regional news channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya explaining why they planned to protest and they utilised an array of social media and Internet tools to disseminate their messages. On 25 January, one activist tried to capture these demands in a single Twitter post: ‘protester’s demands: increase in minimum wage, dismissal of interior ministry, removal of emergency law, shorten presidential term.’ On January 18, a Youtube video went viral of a 6 April Youth activist, Asmaa Mahfouz, explaining why she would be going out into the streets on 25 January. Her video began: ‘four Egyptians have lit themselves on fire to protest the humiliation, hunger, poverty and degradation that they had endured for 30 years. Four Egyptians have lit themselves, thinking that we can have a revolution like Tunisia, that we can have freedom, justice, honor, and human dignity’. Besides the same collection of demands around freedom, justice, and dignity, Mahfouz also references four Egyptian men who lit themselves on fire in the days before the uprising, mimicking the desperate action of Muhammad Bouazizi, the fruit-vendor who ignited the Tunisian protests. Her statement is a reminder that, though the frames developed and deployed by activists before the uprising were drawn from a discourse that was largely national in its genealogy and scope, there were also important symbols and slogans used during the uprising that had a more transnational dimension. Indeed, it is noteworthy that the slogan that came to later define not just the Egyptian uprising but the Arab Spring in general, was one that originated in Tunisia: ‘al-sha’ab yurid isqat al-nitham’ (‘the people want the fall of the regime’). This slogan’s power in Egypt, I would argue, was drawn from its central role in the success of the Tunisian revolution, which served as a critical catalyst and source of inspiration for the protests that emerged on 25 January. However, it was conspicuously absent from the messages and slogans deployed by activists in the days before the protesting – a deliberate decision by these activists to keep their demands one step shy of revolutionary. The chant was later adopted somewhat spontaneously, as people marching on 25 January and 28 January began to gain awareness of their collective power and extend their demands to include a full overthrow of the regime. But to explain the success of the frames deployed before the uprising we must look not so much to transnational symbols and slogans, but to the rich stock of ideas, phrases, images, and narratives that had been inserted by activists over the last decade into the national political discourse in Egypt. It was the power and familiarity of these themes that gave the activists’ frames such resonance, and that allowed them to...
motivate such unprecedented waves of Egyptians to take to the streets on 25 January.

CONCLUSION

Hosni Mubarak stepped down from power on February 11, eighteen days after the Police Day protest, and ushered in a period of post-revolutionary uncertainty. Many of the activists who contributed to the planning and the framing of the uprising’s protests quickly grew disillusioned with the so-called transition as they came to realise how little had truly changed. Many of those grievances that had formed the content of their chants remained just as dire as they had been under Mubarak – the security apparatuses went largely unreformed, unemployment and poverty remained rampant, and an increasingly authoritarian-minded military council seemed unlikely to usher in anything resembling genuine democracy.

However, just as the grievances that had motivated the uprising did not fall away with Mubarak’s resignation, so too, the frames denouncing them remained in active use. The months following the uprising were full of protests, oriented around a dizzying array of political, social, and economic issues. Egyptians made clear that they would not accept a partial revolution, and as they continued to press for their demands to be met, they drew on the same discourses and ideas that had formed the basis for the uprising’s powerful combination of frames. Though there was never again the same convergence of demands that came to a head in the slogan ‘aish, huriyya, karama insaniyya’, the various themes in Egypt’s political discourse continued to be rehearsed and reformed. Workers continued to press for greater labour rights, including a minimum wage in line with the cost of living and the right to organise independent unions, and they drew on the same themes of social justice that had emerged with the Mahalla al-Kubra strikes. Demands for democratic elections and political freedoms were raised on countless occasions, as the military council overseeing the transition again and again backslid on promises to liberalise the political system. And when members of the military massacred 28 Egyptians at the Maspero media building in October 2011, activists raised the same slogans denouncing state violence that had first been heard during the Khaled Said protests.

This continuity in the political discourse before, during, and after the uprising, affirms the notion that collective action frames and political discourses are, in fact, recursive in their relationships. The months following the uprising contributed a rich array of symbols and meanings to Egypt’s cultural sphere, which later served as resources for those activists who came to plan the 25 January uprising. Likewise, the uprising was itself a tremendously creative affair; its participants innovated with the cultural resources at their disposal and, in turn, generated a vast new array of powerful symbols and frames (‘al sha’ab yurid ...’ being the best example). These new meanings quickly became entrenched in the public discourse, in turn offering resources to those Egyptians who continued their activism in the months following the uprising.
Though the aftermath of the uprising has disappointed many, there is still no telling how the frames, symbols, and slogans developed during the protests over these months may, in turn, come to reshape Egyptian political discourse and offer themselves as resources for future waves of activism.

Notes

1 Another common variation of this chant was ‘aish, huriyya, adl igtimaiyya’ or ‘bread, freedom, social justice’. I focus on the first version because it is a more comprehensive expression of the three primary collective action frames that shaped the uprising. As I explain in a later section of the essay, the phrase ‘karama insaniyya’ was drawn squarely from the discourse that emerged in 2010 around the death of Khaled Said, which drew attention to the abuses of the Mubarak police state. It is, therefore, useful as a specific representation of this particular collective action frame. ‘Adl Igtimaiyya’ was also an important slogan, but it was drawn largely from the discourse of the Left and the labour movement, and therefore represents the same collective action frame as does the phrase ‘Aish’. Therefore, though this second slogan was certainly important, I believe that it is less useful as a conceptual representation of the full spectrum of collective action frames that were important in the Egyptian uprising.

2 Interview with Walid Rashid, leader of 6 April Youth, 22 August 2011, tape recorded.

3 Interview with Abu el-Ela Madi, founder and leader of the Wasat Party, 13 August 2008, tape recorded.

4 Interview with Abu el-Ela Madi; interview with George Ishak, former Kefaya General Coordinator, 11 August 2008, tape recorded.

5 Those six figures were: George Ishak, a liberal Christian, Ahmed Baha’a Shaaban, a communist, Abu el-Ela Madi, the Wasat Party founder, Sayyed Abdel Sattar from the Muslim Brotherhood, Mohammed Sa’id Idris, an Arab Nationalist, and Amin Iskaner from the Nasserist Karama Party.

6 Interview with Amin Iskaner, founder and leader in the Karama Party, 12 August 2008, tape recorded.

7 Interview with Ahmed Baha’a Shaaban, independent communist and Kefaya leader, 14 August 2008, tape recorded.


9 Interview with George Ishak.

10 This was evident during many of my interviews, when young activists would often define their political identities in complicated and hyphenated ways. ‘I am a leftist with a nationalist orientation, but I am also devout so I agree with some Islamist ideas too’, for example.


13 Interview with Ahmed Maher, founder and leader of 6 April Youth, 20 August 2008, tape recorded.

14 Post is available at: http://www.facebook.com/events/48462721323/.

15 Author’s participant observation, 6 April Youth conference, Journalists’ Syndicate, Cairo, 17 August 2008.

16 Interview with Amr Abdelrahman, leftist activist, 1 August 2011, tape recorded.

17 The most comprehensive summary of the Khaled Said incident can be found at: Shalaby and el-Marsfawy (2010).

18 A video of these protests can be found here: http://egyptianchronicles.blogspot.com/2010/06/follow-up-why-khaid-was-murdered.html.

19 Interview with Mohammed Adel, leader of 6 April Youth, 17 August 2011, tape recorded.

20 Interview with Ahmed Maher, founder and leader of 6 April Youth, 6 August 2011, tape recorded.


24 Interview with Wael Abbas, blogger and activist, 24 August 2011, tape recorded.

25 Ahmed Maher interview.
26 These can be found at: http://www.facebook.com/notes/%D9%83%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%AF/25-january-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B5%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%85-25-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%8A%D8%B1/19719613628100.


29 The video is available at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SgjIgMdsEuk.

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