

## THE POWER OF THE PUBLIC – A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH ON RECENT HISTORICAL EVENTS



### Anna Hollendung

1983, Magister in Political Science, Carl von Ossietzky University Oldenburg, Germany; human rights observer with IPON in 2010.

*We are witnessing a number of great and unexpected upheavals. On miscellaneous places worldwide – especially in the Arab World – people seized power. Suddenly, people gathered in public spaces and forced dictators to resign or change the rules of the political game, which hitherto seemed mostly to be unthinkable. Even though not every rebellion led to a revolution or the founding of a new constitution, the unforeseen events testify human being's ability to start something new by interrupting the predictable course of events. To understand the uprising in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen and the political changes occurring in Morocco, Jordan and Kuwait, the following article will investigate Hannah Arendt's concept of power.*

What became apparent in these recent or past upheavals such as the People Power Revolution in the Philippines in 1986, or the Peaceful Revolution in Germany in 1989?

We will take a look at theories on peaceful resistance, as Susann Weitzel suggests in her article "as old and young as mountains". Passive resistance, civil disobedience, Saytagraha and non-cooperation are all concepts trying to lay out possibilities on how to act effectively against oppression and injustice. These strategies assume that violence breeds more violence and that the only possibility to break the circle is to opt against violence once and for all. The concepts provide an insight into the steps and rules that actors need to follow in order to succeed. As a result, these concepts are of a technical nature but are not helpful to comprehend the phenomenological nature of the recent historical events.

© Hossam el-Hamalawy | Demonstrators in Cairo, Egypt.



The same applies for theories trying to justify violence. Friedrich Engels, for example, understood violence as the power that hastens the development of economics in line with the general provisions. The emphasis lies on the continuity of a predictable course of events.<sup>1</sup>

### The unpredictable nature of acting

The results of the Arab Rebellion came unexpected. Retrospectively, nobody imagined what the desperate act of self-immolation of the Tunisian greengrocer, Mohamed Bouazizi, was about to initialise. To what extent the actual situation in the region varies from opponent groups' constitutional drafts becomes obvious when we consider the question of Women's Rights in the context of the Arab Revolutions for instance. "Women have been very kind to revolutions, but revolutions have not been kind to them"<sup>2</sup>, summarizes Dr. Rouba Al-Fattal, co-founder of the Euro-Arab Forum. Journalist Mona Eltahawy describes on her blog how the targeting of female activists and journalists for sexual assaults "politicised previously apolitical Egyptians"<sup>3</sup> almost six years ago. The new council emulates their deeds, as new reports about sexual assaults of demonstrators and the so-called "virginity tests" by state officials demonstrate. The idea of control over the course of events turns out to be a mere illusion.

When the power of the people is substituted by its mere opposite – violence, as Hannah Arendt puts it, the unpredictable nature of human action becomes particularly self-evident. Gaddafi losing

1) Arendt, Hannah (2003 [1970]): Macht und Gewalt [On Violence] – München/Zürich, Piper Verlag, p.13.

2) <http://wiisbrussels.wordpress.com/2011/05/28/event-report-women-have-been-kind-to-revolutions-but-revolutions-havent-always-been-kind-to-them/> (last viewed 24 March 2012).

3) See article „These ‚Virginity Tests‘ will spark Egypt's next Revolution" – <http://www.monaeltahawy.com/blog/> (last viewed 25 March 2012).

the support of the Libyan people and hence declaring war on them is such an example. When masses of Libyan people rose up in the streets and started to rebel, power emerged. It revealed that the old regime had already become powerless – it was not based on the consent of the people anymore (if we understand consent in its widest sense that includes passive disagreement). Unfortunately, the Gaddafi regime did not step down when it became conspicuous that there was a hiatus between their expectation of power and the reality. They tried to remain in charge – despite the lack of power.

### One single person is always powerless

The juxtaposition of power and violence strongly distinguishes Arendt

from her predecessors. Unlike Arendt, political theorists and philosophers often conflated power with authority: Max Weber, for example, defined power as „the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests“<sup>4</sup>. According to Arendt, a single person is always powerless. That person might be (physically) strong or may have authority, but power only emerges when people act in concert. It disappears when they disperse, as she declares. In her conception, power is inter-subjective as it arises in the space between people. She also thinks that power is performative as it is grounded on action and only exists as long as it is continually acknowledged.

Therefore, her concept of power does not include a decision against violence as a specific strategy and does not put it as

a moral question – she focuses on politics and liberty. Politics and liberty cannot be based on violence and terror, which destroys the public space, the plurality of human beings and isolates the subjects, as the totalitarian regimes have sternly shown. The existence of a public space, plurality and connectedness between persons are the preconditions for political action. Therefore liberty and politics can exclusively be grounded on the active consent of the citizens – on the power of the people. ■

#### SOURCES

- Arendt, Hannah (2003 [1970]): Macht und Gewalt [On Violence] – München/Zürich, Piper Verlag.
- Arendt, Hannah (2006 [1977]): On revolution – New York, Penguin.
- Arendt, Hannah (2010 [1958]): The human condition – Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, Max (1965): The Theory of Social and Economic Organization – New York, Free Press.
- Mona Eltahaw web-blog – <http://www.monaeltahawy.com/blog/>.
- Women in International Security Brussels – <http://wiisbrussels.wordpress.com>.

4) Weber, Max (1965): The Theory of Social and Economic Organization – New York, Free Press, p.152.



© Philip Rizk | Protestors force Mubarak to resign, Tahrir-Square February 2011.