

# From Postcolonial Social Contract to the Arab Uprisings: The Neoliberal Transformation of the State–Society Relations and the Alternative Spaces of the New Political Activism

Post-Kolonyal Toplumsal Sözleşmeden Arap Ayaklanmalarına: Devlet-Toplum İlişkilerinin Neoliberal Dönüşümü ve Yeni Siyasal Aktivizmin Alternatif Mekânları

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## ABSTRACT

The Arab Uprisings have indelibly impacted the lives of people across the Arab world. Despite many movements facing major disappointments after more than one decade, the material and ideational aspects of the uprisings provide a satisfactory analysis of one of the most significant moments in the history of the region. This article focuses on the political-economic roots of the Arab Uprisings to see the gradual decline in regime security and the breakdown of the postcolonial social contract. It also takes the remarkable role of information technology in shaping new political actorness that managed to combine old and new methods of resistance and in broadening the sphere of political interaction without absolute control of the regimes. Within this context, it is organized as follows. First, it makes sense of the transformation of the state and the state–society relations within the neoliberal reformulation of politics. Second, it reveals the politics of the governed to see alternative forms of politics, solidarity, and information networks. Third, it examines the neoliberal reforms in the Arab world with specific respect to Egypt to see how the state undertook a structural change that eventually undermined the existing social contract which was at the base of the legitimacy. Lastly, the role of the Internet on the politics of the governed in times of political-economic crisis of the state is analyzed. It is argued that the neoliberal transformation of state-society relations and the alternative spaces of political activism both provide a comprehensive outlook to explain the Arab Uprisings.

**Keywords:** Arab uprisings, legitimacy, neoliberalism, social contract, social media

## ÖZ

Arap Ayaklanmaları, Arap dünyasında insanların yaşamlarını kalıcı bir şekilde etkilemiştir. On yılı aşkın süre sonrasında her ne kadar pek çok hareket ciddi hayal kırıklıkları yaşamış olsa da ayaklanmaların maddi ve düşünsel yönleri bölge tarihinin bu en önemli anlarından birine tatmin edici analizler sunmaktadır. Bu çalışma, rejim güvenliğinin kademeli gerileyişi ve post-kolonyal toplumsal sözleşmenin bozulmasına bakmak için Arap ayaklanmalarının politik-ekonomik yönlerine odaklanmaktadır. Çalışma aynı zamanda bilgi teknolojisinin, eski ve yeni direniş yöntemlerini bir araya getirmeyi başaran yeni siyasal aktörlükleri şekillendirmedeki ve rejim kontrolü dışındaki siyasal etkileşim alanını genişletmedeki önemli rolünü ele almaktadır. Bu bağlamda, çalışma şu şekilde organize edilmiştir. İlk olarak, devlet ve devlet-toplum ilişkilerinin dönüşümü neoliberal siyasal dönüşüm kapsamında anlamlandırılmıştır. İkinci olarak, siyasetin, dayanışma ve bilgi ağlarının alternatif biçimlerini görmek için yönetilenlerin siyaseti ele alınmıştır. Üçüncü olarak, Arap dünyasında gerçekleştiren neoliberal reformların meşruiyet dayanağı olan mevcut toplumsal sözleşmenin altını oyduğu Mısır örneği üzerinden ele alınmıştır. Son olarak devletin politik-ekonomik krizi döneminde internetin yönetilenlerin siyaseti üzerindeki rolü analiz edilmiştir.

Received/Geliş Tarihi: 05.09.2022

Accepted/Kabul Tarihi: 19.06.2023

Publication Date/Yayın Tarihi: 15.09.2023

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Cite this article as: Belder, F. (2023). From postcolonial social contract to the arab uprisings: The neoliberal transformation of the state–society relations and the alternative spaces of the new political activism. *Current Perspectives in Social Sciences*, 27(3), 211-216.



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Çalışma, devlet-toplum ilişkilerinin neoliberal dönüşümü ve siyasal aktivizmin alternatif mekânlarının Arap ayaklanmalarını açıklamada kapsamlı bir bakış açısını sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Arap ayaklanmaları, neoliberalizm, sosyal medya, meşruiyet, toplumsal sözleşme

## Introduction

The outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in late 2010 not only upheaved the regional order and challenged the decades-long power structures across the Arab world but also affected the daily lives of ordinary people and questioned the future of postcolonial state-society relations in the region. Even if the term “post-Arab Uprisings” still seems problematic as the long-term consequences of the events have yet to appear, it has already become clear that the democratic optimism at the beginning with the downfall of dictators in Tunisia and Egypt was replaced with the pessimist ambiguity after more than a decade with the return of authoritarianism, the resilience of counterrevolutionary actors, the militarization of movements, and the rise of terror groups once after the emergence of the power vacuum. Despite all these backslidings, this “Arab” moment still represents one of the turning points in the history of Middle East politics. Although several aspects of the movements have already been discussed in the already flourished literature of the Arab Uprisings, this article addresses two interrelated dimensions together within the general framework of neoliberal globalization. To reach a better explanation of this crucial moment in the region, it examines the dissolution of the postcolonial social contract by problematizing the transformation of the state in the neoliberal turn and the emergence of new political subjectivity and its increasing organizational capacity in the age of information technology. Within this aim, this article consists of four chapters. The first two chapters summarize the process of the transformation of the state in general and problematize the political subjectivity of ordinary people by giving reference to Asef Bayat and James Scott’s works. The third chapter revisits the Arab Uprisings literature with respect to the political-economic roots of the events to see how a particular sort of social contract failed since the 1970s. The last chapter elaborates on the role of virtual space as a new place of resistance to see the transformation of this revolutionary public space. It claims that neoliberal globalization not only undermined the state legitimacy across the region because of the erosion of the social contract to the detriment of the people and the massive impoverishment but also transformed the ways people narrate, spread, and act in political activity.

### The Neoliberal Transformation of the State

Neoliberal turn has often been associated with the concept of economic globalization. And the relationship between economic globalization and the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings provides satisfactory answers by putting forward the structural transformation that Middle Eastern countries have experienced since the 1970s. It is not uncommon (and not wrong) to see the uprisings as a form of resistance against authoritarianism on the ground of democracy seeking, however, focusing solely on the democratic demands of people by recalling the “end of history” narrative (Herscovitch, 2011) has risks of neglecting the erosion of the postcolonial social contract over years. On the contrary, the political-economic approach combines the role of economic transformation in undermining the regime legitimacy, it does not underestimate the authoritarian nature of the regimes as it also problematizes the role of the state in this neoliberal transformation. The transformative reforms like privatization, removal of the state from the market, or deregulations were all undertaken by the state itself (Ayubi, 1997, p. 127). Moreover, the popular slogans of the uprisings not only addressed political demands like democracy and human rights but also social demands (Achcar & Matta, 2016, p. 2).

The neoliberal counteroffensive during the period of profit stagnation at the beginning of the 1970s under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (Great Britain) and Ronald Reagan (the United States) with the efforts of two intergovernmental organizations of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank created a new consensus that came to be called the Washington Consensus and it managed to fuel privatization, opening the frontiers to trade and financial transactions and abandoning the practices of the welfare state not only in the Western countries but also in the Global South and in the socialist world (Wallerstein, 2008). Although the 19th century witnessed a greater economic interdependence (Henry, 2003, p. 3), the use of political tools instead of direct military ones changed the means of expansion in general (Held et al., 2003, p. 72). Even if the application of military tools has not entirely been abandoned, neoliberal globalization made the Western states capable of imposing sanctions, pressures, conditionality, and intervention on weaker developing countries (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 337).

This neoliberal turn has not only changed the international political and economic dynamics but also kicked the reformulation of the state and state-society relations. Although various types of such relations across the world began to be transformed into a general neoliberal form, local differences and the contextual embeddedness of neoliberal restructuring made the “one fits all model” impossible, instead resulting in “actually existing neoliberalism” that describes single logic, various practices (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). The developed world was not free from being affected. The technocratic governments that emerged after the economic crisis despite the accusations of democracy suspension show the changing patterns of governance. Moreover, the political and economic reforms in this neoliberal age had different conclusions even in the same region. While some countries failed the process, some others like Turkey, Chile, and India underwent the transformation relatively easier (Achcar, 2013, p. 53). In the Middle East, Nazih Ayubi claims that while strong states like Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia having the institutional network for economic restructuring became more successful in privatization than fierce states like Syria, Iraq, or possibly Somalia, which had to depend on raw violence and oppression (Ayubi, 1997, p. 127).

David Harvey interprets the privatization and liberalization of the market as a new round of enclosure of the commons at the expense of the massive dispossessions to solve the overaccumulation crisis (Harvey, 2005, pp. 157–158). In this sort of asset redistribution, the upper classes are favored rather than the lower classes (Harvey, 2005, p. 159). The neoliberal state turned into an organization that became more accountable to transnational capital instead of its citizens (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 338). The neoliberal restructuring had also significant impacts on the organization of the cities. Asef Bayat describes the neoliberal city as “a lost city: where capital rules, the affluent enjoy, and the subaltern is entrapped; it is a city of glaring inequality and imbalance, where the ideal of the ‘right to the city’ is all but vanished” (Bayat, 2012, p. 110). Regarding spatiality, reconstruction projects push lower- and middle-class residents to move out of the cities to look for affordable accommodation (Bogaert, 2013, p. 227). Although it does not necessarily build a causal link between dispossession and the revolutionary wave, it demonstrates the widening areas of struggle.

### The Politics of the Governed

The daily life practices of the governed and their informal participation in politics contain clues for the potential for political resistance. The question is if the activities of the ordinary people are solely part of their daily routines without generating significant political effect, which eventually portrays them as passive masses, or if these are practices that reproduce or challenge the hegemony, which views them as the role of agents presents an initial dilemma at the first glance. James Scott’s “everyday resistance,” “hidden transcript,” or “dissident subculture” concepts challenge the idea that the ruling elite has intellectual authority over the people alongside its coercive authority and claims that against the material form of domination, people can evade or search illicit acts to obtain gain (Scott, 1989, pp. 55–56). Scott makes a distinction between the public transcript (constrained by the power) and hidden transcripts (for a different audience and under different constraints) (Scott, 1990, p. 5). He gives an example from the passage in *Antigone* to demonstrate the role of this hidden transcript and the silent spread of dissidence even under dictatorship: “Your presence frightens any common man from saying things you would not care to hear, but, in dark corners, I have heard them say how the whole town is grieving for this girl unjustly doomed if ever a woman was to die in shame for glorious action done. ...This is the undercover speech in town” (Scott, 1990, p. 28).

However, to what extent alternative scenarios or evasive practices can be defined as a form of disobedience or resistance is not free from questioning. Scott himself accepts that these hidden transcripts mostly remain hidden or enacted (Scott, 1990, p. 16). Regarding the actions, Scott also distinguishes real resistance from a token, incidental, or epiphenomenal activities by underscoring the criteria of intention in his resistance argument (Scott, 1985, p. 292). These actions can also be defined as survival strategies rather than challenging the existing domination, but as Salwa Ismael suggests, these can still reveal the potential of everyday life practices of providing the basic infrastructure for the organization of collective action (Ismail, 2006, p. xxxiii). Still, these practices may cause the emergence of “false conscientiousness” and makes an illusion and appease the demands (White, 2013, p. 56). On the contrary, regarding informal politics, Asef Bayat underlines the continuity of the “quiet encroachment of the ordinary”<sup>1</sup> to define the nonmovement (collective actions of non-collective actors) of the urban dispossessed as a form of poor struggle to survive and these activities (from tapping electricity or water illegally to street vendors, from private paid tutoring of the schoolteachers to street lawyers or unregistered practitioners, etc.) not only makes changes in urban structure but also their own lives (Bayat, 2013, pp. 15–16). Bayat describes street politics as a power relationship between encroachers and the authorities (Bayat, 2013, p. 52). In the neoliberal city, the outdoor spaces not only serve as assets in economic livelihood but also social/cultural reproduction of the urban population and a fertile ground for the expression of street politics and streets, furthermore, serves as a space where people shape identities, build solidarities, and extend their protests to include other people (Bayat, 2013, p. 13).

The next two chapters examine two prominent variables to make sense of the mobilization of the people in the region with a special focus on Egypt: the neoliberal transformation of the state and the dissolution of the social contract based on socioeconomic terms and the emergence of the Internet as a new alternative space of struggle.

### Transformation of the Middle East: Networks of Privileges vs. Impoverished Masses

Regarding the political and economic transformation of the region, Egypt appears to be the leading actor not only became the first Arab nation to adopt economic opening in the 1970s but also influenced other Arab countries. Just as it was the first Arab country to promote the public sector in the 1950s and 1960s, it was also the first (except Tunisia) Arab country to experience neoliberal reforms and became the mother of Arab liberalizations (Ayubi, 1997, p. 129). In 1974, Egypt formally launched open-door economic policies (*infatih*) that implied internal (strengthening the private sector through government concessions) and external (encouraging the foreign capital) processes of liberalization (El Shakry, 2012, p. 101).

Economic liberalization in Egypt was not the result of the increasing demands of the national bourgeoisie regarding the removal of state regulations but instead a state-led initiative as a response to the fiscal crisis of the state and the external pressure from global capitalism through its institutions (Ayubi, 1997, p. 125). From this side, economic liberalization did not go hand in hand with political liberalization. The unequal distribution of property rights by favoring certain private actors emerged as a method of regime survival in a form of politically embedded cronyism (Adly, 2009). As privatization processes were carried out by the regimes to mobilize or create their own elites through allocating the state resources, which eventually consolidated a new sort of patrimonial relations. These policies increased the economic growth that allowed certain segments (like merchants, real-estate bidders, contractors, and import-export facilitators) to accumulate a vast amount of wealth and those actors became the newly viable politico-economic actors within the Egyptian polity (Menza, 2012, p. 324). Contrary to the globalization discourse, the new business elites were more dependent on the state for privileges in terms of new contracts and business opportunities, their relations with the labor and rival business cliques, and unlike the hegemonic

1 The term describes “the silent, protracted, but pervasive advancement of the ordinary people on the propertied, powerful, or the public, in order to survive and improve their lives” (Bayat, 2013, p. 46).

bourgeoisie that could demand limited democracy for itself, crony capitalists were reluctant to pursue any sort of democratic transparency (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 341). Economic reform programs in the region provided a privileged strata to access the benefits of new economic policies (Heydemann, 2004).

The so-called depoliticization of economic policy (technocratization) enabled the removal of the role of politics in the economic area whereas increasing regime control over society (Aggestam et al., 2012, pp. 333–334). This newly emerged alliance between the new business elite and the regime created a sort of neoliberal authoritarianism. More importantly, these neoliberal steps went hand in hand with the decline of the developmental state policies that had been performed in the 1950s and 1960s and of the social contract based on the exchange of political loyalty with social welfare and development (Dahi, 2011; El Shakry, 2012, p. 100). For example, in Egypt, the IMF-mandated structural adjustment policies in the 1990s intensified the concentration of capital into fewer hands whereas retreated the state sector and eliminated the safety net welfare benefits, and the gradual decline in social support resulted in massive impoverishment (El Shakry, 2012, pp. 102–103). The number of people living on 2\$ per day increased from 24.8% in 1990 to 29.9% in 1998 over the region this decade (Bogaert, 2013, p. 225).

This impoverishment and the decline of living standards and the spread of discontentedness brought different sectors of the society closer (Roccu, 2013, pp. 435–436). People in the vast majority who shared the dispossession and deprivation emerged as a new category that Asef Bayat named “urban subalterns.” “This is a descriptive term referring broadly to the non-elites—those women and men who remain on the margins of political and economic power, such as the urban disenfranchised, the unemployed, the working poor, and the impoverished middle classes” (Ghandour-Demiri, 2013). The proletarianization of the middle class and the impoverishment of the working classes (peasants, factory workers, and laborers in the informal economy) were the main consequences of neoliberalism (Roccu, 2013, p. 437). The growth of “middle-class poor” that enjoyed college degrees but were pushed by economic deprivation played a key role in the Arab Uprisings (Bayat, 2013, p. 264). Nevertheless, this large coalition of malcontents did not come together under a clear ideology, and it became common to call the uprisings postmodern or post-ideological.

The middle class’s encroaching actions based on the necessity to survive and improve life (Bayat, 2013, p. 48) also undertook a transformation when consumer goods and the Internet appeared as new areas of encroachment. For example, the extensive use of fake products not only shows the desire of the youth to integrate with the global culture but also creates new areas for the black market and informal relations. The Internet has also provided a new platform to use, share, or sell pirated products including those which are subjected to copyright and eventually create a new network. Thus, Bayat’s passive network concept that defines “instantaneous communication among atomized individuals, which is established by a tacit recognition of their common identity, and which is mediated through space” (Bayat, 2000, p. 552) was broadened by including new areas of virtual communication among individuals. It cannot be seen as a direct political action against the established regimes but as a form of permanent encroachment that created new sort of communities and requires problematizing the role of the Internet on the creation (and actions) of the new political subject.

### **Virtual Space of Resistance and the New Political Subject**

Alongside the structural shift through the breaking of the postcolonial social contract that resulted in political authoritarianism and socioeconomic inequalities, technological developments played an intervening role in the new arena of political confrontation between the regimes and the people. Regarding the Arab Uprisings, the social media means have often been portrayed as game-changer variable despite earlier protests like the Kefaya movement in Egypt already on the stage.

The role of the Internet is twofold. The first role is related to the extension of the encroachment space as a result of ongoing dispossession. The second role is about its political and cultural impacts. It not only opened new virtual spaces to organize popular resistance but also shaped the new political subject by enhancing the actorness capacity. The lack of control turns the Internet into a kind of political street where the exchange of thought, fun, cartoons, illustrations, and images are freely exchanged (Wolff, 2011). Following Bayat’s definition of the political street, the opening of the online channels created the virtual political street where the resistance could be organized. For instance, “the Protester” image was chosen as the person of the year 2011 by *TIME* magazine. In the portrayed image, the face of the protester was covered so nothing that makes the protester belong to any race, ideology, sex, religion, etc. was seen. The magazine highlighted the impacts that protesters had in 2011 “from the Arab Uprisings to Athens, from Occupy Wall Street to Moscow” (Time, 2011). Independently of *TIME* magazine, the rise of a new political subject that is not belonging to any certain class or group emerged largely thanks to the conquest of the virtual new world. In the Arab Uprisings, Internet groups also revolutionized the way that meetings are organized and conducted (Mossallam, 2013, p. 119).

The rise of organizational and communicational capacity also changed the language of protests on the grounds of democracy although the traditional understanding of “democratization” used to contain norm packages mostly prepared by the Western non-governmental institutions based on universal values. The 2011 movements showed the representation of the demands regarding social justice and political participation with the combination of the approaches that had previously been presumed as contradictory such as Islam and democracy or nationalism and cosmopolitanism (Adib-Moghaddam, 2013, p. 54). These movements also brought the classical understanding of globalization that is often associated with democratization in certain means and objectives.

Despite the regime’s control over the traditional media, social media opened a new platform that ensured people the chance to participate in the information production process and disseminate their views rather than being passive recipients of the process. This radical change in information and communication technology radically undermined state control over these areas. While Facebook was depicted as “fitna” (sedition) by many, it was also used by the regime itself to struggle with the emerging threat even if it stayed very ineffective (Herrera, 2012, p. 93). When the protests broke out, regimes across the Arab world shut down online communication to contain the protests (Flock, 2011; Reuters, 2011; Williams, 2011)

Although there are certain claims that social media creates an illusion, appeases people, blurs the facts, or disorganizes the aims, these alternative ways of organization and politicization obscured the division between political activism and an apolitical stance by providing a new political sphere. The use of the slogan “The Revolution Will Be Tweeted” by referring to the famous poem and song of Gil Scott-Heron “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” was illustrating the changing nature of the media in terms of political activity and the role of traditional power relations. As opposed to traditional media, social media was not located in a power hierarchy. Certainly, social media was not the main factor in the revolutions, or Internet users were not the only actors in protests (Abdulla, 2011). In fact, without decades-long political and economic grievances, there would be no material base for the uprisings. Moreover, street politics had already become an integral part of the socio-political life in the region (Bayat, 2013). Moreover, the street experience was the main reason why the movement in 2011 continued even after the Internet and mobile phone blockade (Alexander, 2011). Rather than instigating people by itself, social media means provided an alternative political street in the face of the regime's strict control over the public sphere to circulate ideas and dissidence (Wolff, 2011). The circulation of dissidence against the regime violence, as seen on the Facebook page for the memory of Khaled Said who was killed by the police in Egypt, became an integral part of this process. This virtual platform memorialized him not only as immortal but also as a symbol of the entire corrupted system in the country (Ali, 2012).

The adoption of new methods of political activism accelerated the further integration of the virtual and physical street and these globalized means of communication deprived the regimes of applying full control over information. While the new political activism in the region was challenging the ideological and repressive tools of the regimes, it went beyond the limitations of the hegemony of the traditional democratization discourse of the Western international institutions by creating a new political language and methods. And the virtual space played an intervening role to remove already existing barriers in this regard.

## Conclusion

The Internet has never solely been the main engine of the revolutions. However, its transformative role in political organization and activism is incontestable. The neoliberal reforms started to undermine the postcolonial social contract since the 1970s in the region. The state withdrew from welfare policies while increasing its authoritarian characteristics, regimes deprived of popular legitimacy despite their decades-long resilience. In the face of the transformation of the state in a neoliberal manner, people who experienced dispossession and impoverishment became the actors of street politics. The broadening of the public sphere in alternative platforms like social media that was not under the total control of the regimes unlike the physical space not only provided a new platform for information sharing, solidarity, and organization but also strengthened the political subjectivity in this socioeconomic period of deprivations. This article highlighted this double process as two central pillars to explain the Arab Uprisings. While the political-economic roots of the uprisings paved the way for the massive discontent as a result of the unilateral breakdown of the social contract, the Internet enabled the people to organize hidden transcripts in the newly emerged political street. The increasing number of dispossessed and their growing political organizational capacity are two interrelated factors to read the Egyptian revolution of 2011. This sort of reading necessarily links the Arab Uprisings with other protests that took place in the same years from different parts of the world by going beyond to see these uprisings as exceptional phenomena.

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**Ethics Committee Approval:** Ethical committee approval is not required for this study as it does not involve data collection from participants through surveys, interviews, focus group studies, etc.

**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Declaration of Interests:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Funding:** The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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**Etik Komite Onayı:** Bu çalışmada anket, mülakat, odak grup çalışması vs. gibi katılımcılardan veri toplamaya yönelik bir yol izlenmediği için etik kurul onayına gerek yoktur.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

**Çıkar Çatışması:** Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

**Finansal Destek:** Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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