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Sovereignty in the Arab Spring: Discourse of Survival and Legitimation by Mubarak and Assad

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Introduction*

Sovereignty is ambiguous and elusive concept; it is always 'saturated with multiple meanings, especially as other concepts are either defined in terms of it or depend on it for their own meanings'. [1] The catch-all features allow manoeuvrability for users mainly including state actors in their search for tools to legitimate, justify and normalise their policies. My argument in this paper is that Arab leaders used 'sovereignty' at the critical juncture of the so-called Arab Spring. First, those leaders constructed a discourse of sovereignty to counter that of the opposition expressed in the waves of street protests. While protests were all on battles for human rights and the 'personal' of sovereignty, the leaders made it a battle over a collective sovereignty as symbolised by 'territory' that needs protection to avoid threats such as 'chaos' or 'external enemies' seeking to re-occupy, re-map or re-territorialise it. The mission of this collectivised and Objectified mission, i.e. defending this bounded piece of land, needs protectors. Further to add to contradictory nature of sovereignty, the territorialisation is both de-personifying and personifying at the same time. State leaders can be sovereignty personified as they are the ones who can claim the mission of safeguarding it by protecting territory, preventing 'chaos' and forcing out 'external' enemies. I use Syrian President Bashar Assad and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to understand and explain the features of sovereignty as well as its functionality as an instrumentally adopted tool for survival and legitimacy. The specific focus on the two cases comes with the added benefit of comparing the efficacy of the sovereignty discourse as the latter was overthrown from his office and the other remains for now. This perhaps also open the door for understanding patterns of similarities and differences with one case acting as the 'control variable' in comparison with the other.

I analyse 13 political speeches delivered by Mubarak and Assad from the start of the 2011 protests against their rule until their disappearance from power (by resignation for Mubarak) or until now (in the case of Assad, who is still in power). The sample includes, for Mubarak, three speeches he made between January 25 (when the protests began) and his resignation on February 11. For Assad, who has made dozens of speeches during the 10-year long Syrian conflict, I randomly chose one of these speeches per year. The time intervals were thus chosen to correspond with the periods of upheaval and contestation initiated by the Arab Spring events or of these leaders' rule.

The analytical method is a form of frame analysis. As I use the concept here, frames are thematic or formal textual elements of a discourse that can be identified across multiple instances of use, and that function as 'principles of organisation' of other thematic or formal elements. The frames take the form of 'specific keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments'.[2] As part of Entman's conceptualisation, the frames are considered as having been selected and made salient by the speakers, as indicating a 'perceived reality' made *salient* in the speech, and highlighting certain components of the notion. The salience is achieved through *consistency*,

when phrases are mentioned repeatedly, and *coherence*, when themes and expressions are related to others, as well as the thematic *resonance* of the term in the surrounding culture of the audience. Theoretically, the resonance of a statement or discourse is the way its content and frame invoke and correspond to 'background understandings of the way things are…and common-sense logics about the way things relate'.[3] Specific meanings can be stabilised by resonating with an established 'historical or cultural character', or with experiences and events in which they appear involved. The particularities of social organisation or historical events may play a role in determining what themes leaders focus on within the broader discursive landscape. Sovereignty can be understood, in accordance with traditional realist uses, as including three forms or elements: 'Westphalian sovereignty', 'international legal sovereignty', and 'domestic sovereignty'.[4] Still, from a constructivist perspective, they can also stand as frames, especially when they can be traced in the speeches in terms of their intertextual relationships with significant terms or features, as well their interaction with the surrounding environment to which they were responding, and where they can be put to use. Rather than just remarking the frequency of their use in a speech or context, I identify similarities and differences in frames both between the two leaders, and within each of their speeches. Again, the concept of sovereignty being elusive and polysemous, its use in framing the contents of a speech can take various forms.

The 'Westphalian Sovereignty' Frame

The Arab leaders consistently reference sovereignty in the speeches above all with reference to *territoriality* and *non-intervention*. The principles constitute the 'Westphalian sovereignty' as they relate to the Peace of Westphalia under which 'the reformation of theology transformed the territorial vassals of the Vatican into the nation states of Europe'.[5]Territoriality means that 'states exist in specific territories within which domestic political authorities are the sole arbiters of legitimate behaviour'.[6] Historically, the control of territory has been congruent with political legitimacy and regime survival since the early modern period in Europe, when 'sovereign rulers and dynasties were preoccupied with territory'.[7]

This association of governance with a territory always implicated the state in the potentiality for wars with other states, which could be fought over territories or result in their boundaries being re-drawn.[8] It is sometimes thought, in a poststructuralist vein, that the existence of territory as a referent for government can help construct the meanings of a sovereignty that otherwise would be since it can fixate some of its meanings, always 'undecidable' or '[unstabilizable]'.[9] Similarly, reference to it can also stabilise a leader's authority by seeming to naturalise it, as if it were pre-given or 'pre-discursive'.[10] The two Arab leaders constructed their discourse using a model that brings together a state's rulers, territory, and capacity for war. Mubarak is a case in point.

In the three speeches considered, Mubarak builds his legitimacy as President on the basis of his past as former Commander of the Air Force in the 1973 war, in the wake of which Egypt had restored to its territory that had been occupied by Israel for six years. Connecting his credentials as head of state, military commander, and heroic winner of territory is a practice that Mubarak perfected across the 30 years of his rule.[11] Using these frames, Mubarak advocated his remaining in power through a declared 'social contract' that involved his being personally rewarded with this for his achievement in the unquestioned massive 'victory'.[12]

Even after Egypt reached a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 and had restored to it all of its previously occupied land (the Sinai peninsula), this legitimating contract continued to be invoked, as Mubarak seized opportunities to (re)construct himself as the 'hero of war and peace' on the basis of the 'land for peace' formula drawn from the cease-fire agreement. 'Here I have lived and fought for its [Egypt's] sake', he proclaimed, 'and I defended its land, its sovereignty, and interests'. [13] Coherently linking nation, territory, and personal engagement, he declared in epic fashion, 'I had already lived the years of occupation [of Egyptian land]; I lived also the moments of crossing [the land] …The best moment of my life was when I put the Egyptian flag on Sinai [on the land reclaimed after the war]'.[14]

Non-intervention is the other Westphalian principle under which no country has the right to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. On this basis, a 'right of independence' was claimed in the Middle East in the early twentieth century as European colonialism was being thrown off. Assad's speeches are replete with references evoking this historic imagery to conveniently pose as anti-colonialist: 'The colonialist West is still colonialist; the means may change, but its essence is still the same'. The mention of 'colonialism' adds resonance to his speeches by making connections to legitimating narratives that Syrian audiences would recognise. [15] Some scholars attribute to the Baathist party of Hafez al-Assad, President from 1971 to his death in 2000 (when his son Bashar, in power since, was elected), the maintaining as a priority 'the consolidation of the territorial state'. [16] A member of the minority Alawite sect who stood opposed to foreign occupation, and whose legitimacy and authority were questioned by the majority Sunni population, protecting territory served for three decades as his principal justification for holding power.[17]

Domestic Sovereignty

The two Arab also appealed to that feature of sovereignty that is 'domestic sovereignty'. Krasner defines this as involving how 'public authority is organised' and how 'effectively' it is exercised. It also is territorial, as it requires leaders who 'control developments within their own territory', especially by 'maintaining order' and to the 'one final and absolute authority' to carry out decisions.

The leaders framed the protests against their rule as challenging their 'domestic sovereignty'. One keyword repeated frequently in the speeches in describing the protests is 'sabotage'; this term was used to mean any challenge to the ruler's capacity to 'control developments' or 'maintain order',

thus referencing the impersonal functioning of state and economy. Mubarak said protestors 'blocking roads and attacking vital installations and public and private properties' were engaged in acts of 'sabotage'.[18] This rhetoric legitimated the use of violence, as protestors, qua 'saboteurs', were stripped of their right to assemble and speak. The use of such signifiers to legitimate state violence also instrumentalises an identity and difference of two terms that in the political imaginary of the West were always linked, as law warrants the use of violence against 'violence'; the discourse of sovereignty thus serves as the 'threshold on which violence passes into law and law passes over into violence'.[19]

This concept of 'sabotage' as applied to political entities coheres well with other frames in discourses of territorialised Westphalian sovereignty. In this model, leaders seek to protect the territorial state from internal 'saboteurs' exactly as they must protect borders threatened by 'external enemies' like returning colonisers.

Another keyword in the texts is 'chaos', posed as a threat by internal forces figured as 'outside'. Mubarak claimed that the protests against his rule were 'exploited by those who sought to spread chaos…and to violate the constitutional legitimacy'.[20] This speech followed another in which he warned that the protests went 'beyond chaos….to a larger scheme aimed at shaking stability and an attack on legitimacy'.[21] Assad sternly warned protestors demanding his resignati-on: 'chaos hides in the name of calls for reform'; 'chaos will lead to sectarianism'[22] and 'chaos will destroy Syria'.[23]

'International Legal Sovereignty'

One more feature of sovereignty is the equality of states, each accorded recognition in the international state system as part of obtaining the 'international legal sovereignty'. As termed by Krasner, this feature serves legitimation and survival by providing the 'possibility for rulers to secure external resources' and 'enhance their ability to stay in power' of the ruler.[24] Assad alone made it central, thanking Russia, China, and Iran for their military involvement in the conflict, supposedly in support of Syria's sovereignty: 'Thanks to Russia, China and Iran…These are states respecting the sovereignty of Syria';[25] 'thanks to Russia, Iran and China…for supporting the right to self-independence[26] and 'defending the UN conventions related to that'.[27]

Assad got the support of Russian President Vladimir Putin. He and Putin have maintained the coherence and resonance of their frames throughout the Syrian conflict. They reference international legal sovereignty by distinguishing between 'intervention by coercion' or 'by invitation'; Russia's was the latter, and 'in accordance with the international law and the UN Charter',[28] in contrast with that of other states,[29] whose 'interference' Russia opposed at the UN. Iranian officials and diplomats similarly claimed to desire mainly 'that the territorial integrity of Syria be maintained' in accordance with 'the norms and principles of international law'.[30] The appeal to principles in the selection of allies permitted involvement is by definition *normalising.* The norms are not merely indicated with a decisive authority sufficient to them, but enunciated through repetition of keywords

and other 'repeated but varied performative acts'.[31] All these attempts allow a coordinated 'discursive offensive' or a 'discursive assault' supporting the regime of Assad.[32]

Conclusion

The paper seeks to present preliminary findings drawn on my claim that sovereignty is less than a 'dilemma' or a 'problem', as a general trend in literature would go for, and more of an opportunity or an asset allowing its users to meet their objectives and allowing sovereignty itself to survive and even thrive in the globalising world of politics of today. I proved this argument by treating sovereignty as a discourse processed textually in a number of frames *selected* and *emphasised* in the political speeches of Mubarak and Assad. The frames gain shape or metaphorise into thematised meanings as they gain consistence (judged by repetition) and coherence (judged by how far the frames or the types of sovereignty align with or intertextually talk to each other). Furthermore, as my further research seeks to explore, the context adds resonance (judged by surrounding culture, historical happenings and experiences provide support the articulation and materialisation of frames). The framing by consistence, coherence and resonance can support the use of sovereignty it can cover the hypocritical use of it. If anything, the hypocrisy, that includes double usage and adopting contradictory attributes or separating theoretical ideals from practical uses, gets more organised and therefore perhaps more effective and credible. For example, the article found how Assad's frames on Westphalian sovereignty resonates with Putin's frames on the legal international sovereignty demanding respect of Syria's territoriality and non-intervention as well as respect for the broader realist world order dominated by sovereign states. The fact that Putin himself has constructed Westphalian sovereignty to legitimate his own powers in Russia as part of his 'sovereign democracy' throws further resonance on Assad's frames. Assad's discourse gains resonance also within a shift in the regional balance of power, conferring greater agency upon states like Iran repositioning itself in the wake of the Arab Spring.

My project is to understand sovereignty as discourse and process moving between articulation as explored in this paper and operationalisation in the next one can help us understand more dynamics of survival and legitimation in the Arab Spring. More specifically, what are the differences in this articulation and operationalisation between Assad who so far survived the opposition against him for ten years and Mubarak who lost their power within less than a year? In order to answer the question, we can stay away from long-entrenched binaries that have occupied a large part of the international relations literature such as state and territory, inside and outside, internal and external, and de facto and de jure. We can rather adopt the conceptualisation which understands the effectiveness of sovereignty as a practice. In this practice, sovereignty discourse can be constructed, reconstructed, re-invented, 'shared', 'pooled', and 'contested' across 'space-spanning' networks which can be exercised non-territorially even within the territorial boundaries of a state as Agnew would argue.[33] Demarcation through borders, the essence of state territoriality under the

Westphalian concept, relies not only on the 'boundaries of domination' and tools of coercion to keep, or even violate, this demarcation.[34] In this sense, the enigmatic, elusive and controversial nature of sovereignty is not judged as positive or negative, good or evil, but rather functional or not. It is also a process as these frames are not rising out of nowhere. They take shape in interaction with rival frames supposedly meant to counter, downsize or falsify his claims. In the case of Assad, and unlike Mubarak, rival frames were assets rather than a leverage. The behavior of the US and Western allies failed to articulate consistent, coherent or resonant frames on basis of the R2P principle of intervention, meant to protect principles of the Lockean sovereignty such as human rights or freedom of expression. They also failed to materialise these articulated frames through hesitant military support, undecidedness on the destiny of Assad and scattered diplomacy. This angle of operationalisation is meant to be investigated as part of my project.

Notes

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