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Chiara Diana, Clément Steuer. ‘We are the people’: Framing the notion of the people in the Egyptian revolutionary context. *Mediterranean Politics*, 2021, 26 (1), pp.50-54. 10.1080/13629395.2019.1673405 . halshs-02338143

HAL Id: halshs-02338143

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02338143v1>

Submitted on 23 May 2023

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To cite this article: Chiara Diana & Clément Steuer (2021) 'We are the people': Framing the notion of the people in the Egyptian revolutionary context, *Mediterranean Politics*, 26:1, 50-54, DOI: [10.1080/13629395.2019.1673405](https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2019.1673405)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2019.1673405>



Published online: 29 Oct 2019.



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INTRODUCTION



'We are the people': Framing the notion of the people in the Egyptian revolutionary context

Chiara Diana^a and Clément Steuer^b

^aDepartment of Political Science, Université libre de Bruxelles, Brussels; ^bCNRS (Ladyss, UMR 7533)/ERC TARICA, Paris, France

ABSTRACT

The long dismissed notion of the people has recently generated much interest in academic literature. Understood as an “emotional community”, *the people* has been returned to centre stage physically and symbolically by the emblematic slogan “The people want the fall of the regime”, during the Arab Spring. This themed issue investigates not only the heuristic interest of the notion of the people but also its multifaceted development in the revolutionary Egypt. Specifically, the authors explore the construction of the people’s legitimacy through revolutionary slogans, the emergence of the political subjectivity of child martyrs, and the way in which political actors used this notion during the 2011 elections.

KEYWORDS People; revolution; Egypt; slogans; children; election

Historically, the notion of the people was placed at the heart of Western political life by the Atlantic revolutions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Nevertheless, its long association with romanticism, and the way it has been used by authoritarian regimes and nationalist movements since then, has contributed to the discrediting of this notion in the field of social sciences. Less rigorously defined than social class, and difficult to distinguish from other concepts such as nation, community or electoral body, the notion of the people is suspected of obfuscating debate rather than helping our understanding of social phenomena. Nevertheless, starting in December 2010, the events of the Arab Spring have returned this term to the front of the stage, notably through the emblematic slogan, ‘The people want the fall of the regime’, forcing scholars to take this notion into account (Badiou et al., 2016; Bozarlsan, 2015; Butler, 2013; Colla, 2012; Fahmi, 2013; Sabaseviciute, 2016; Seikaly et al., 2015). The recent interest of social scientists in the notion of the people should be viewed in relation to the shift in their attitude towards the role of emotion in politics, henceforth perceived as a potentially democratic value. Indeed, one definition of the people could be an ‘emotional community’, distinct from a ‘rational community’, which

CONTACT Chiara Diana  chiara.diana@ulb.ac.be

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would be the electoral body. While the latter is defined from a juridical viewpoint and internally regulated through democratic procedures, the 'emotional community' of the people includes the dead, children, possibly some categories of foreigner (for instance, the Manouchian group within the French Resistance), and even ideas, principles and slogans, with internal contradictions resolved by the belief in a common goal and destiny, i.e., a 'collective consciousness' (Durkheim, 1966). This concept of the people, as it appears in revolutionary times, has long been an object of suspicion because it presents many similarities with identitarian definitions of the community. Nevertheless, it distinguishes itself from these 'ugly' objects, because it does not try to erase its own diversity, but rather celebrates it.

The papers gathered in this themed section examine the notion of the people in the Egyptian revolutionary context. Specifically, the authors seek to explore not only the heuristic interest of this notion, but also the construction of *the people's* legitimacy through the revolutionary slogans, the newly emerged subjectivities enriching the multiple character of *the people*, and the way in which *the people* has been used by political actors and has mobilized ordinary citizens.

Through a semantic and contextual analysis of the revolutionary slogans, Zoé Carle's article explores the semantic auto-construction of the people during revolutionary times, and the construction and deconstruction of the ambiguous power embodied by formulas such as 'We are the People', and 'The People want' through repetitions across space and time. For instance, the slogan 'the People want the fall of the regime' emerged first during the popular mobilizations in Tunisia in 2010–2011. It was then repeated during the revolutionary movements in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and more recently in Algeria and in Sudan. Through such repetition, the slogan intends to refer not only to the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan or Syrian people, but also to the Arab people as a whole (Seikaly et al., 2015). Furthermore, Carle's article reminds us that slogans lead the masses into action and can appeal to the passions and emotions. The latter are no longer seen as an irrational force moving the crowds, but as a positive value that is capable of mobilizing citizens. The slogan is defined as 'a fragment of collective emotion', expressing the voice of the people, in contrast to the professional speech of politicians, who supposedly appeal to reason. On this reading, the slogans that succeeded 'ended up representing the movement itself' ('the people want ...').

In her article, Chiara Diana analyses the phenomenon of child-martyrdom during the 25 January 2011 revolution, and interrogates whether it is possible to legitimate this phenomenon. The exploration of child martyrs' cases allows Diana to expose common misconceptions about the relation between politics and children, adulthood and childhood. As a social group well-endowed of agency, children are integrated into the adult world and are brought into the emotional community of the people through the violence of death, through the phenomenon of martyrdom in the revolutionary setting. The Egyptian revolution, and the Arab Spring in general, has undoubtedly engendered an

important evolution in the martyrdom narrative. Through novel forms of performance within the memorialization process, ordinary people took the power to define and to assign the status of martyr to citizens – adults and the young, including the youngest – who have been victims of regime violence. The process of memorialization of martyred children, triggered by the people through performative practices such as graffiti, video clips, poems, songs, and pictures, allows to erasure of the symbolic borders between childhood and adulthood and transcends the lines between the individual and the collective. Thereby, child-martyrs are hailed in the arena of revolutionary martyrs, embodying thus a new subjectivity of the people.

Clément Steuer's article studies the tension between the emotional community and the so-called 'rational community' as it is described in the classical conception of democracy, and which consists of an institutional regulation of its structural divisions through the competition that takes place between political parties representing diverse social groups. The revolutionary camp positioned itself foremost on less important structural cleavages (military/civil; owners/workers), when the most pressing issue in the Egyptian context was the secular/Islamist divide. Claiming to represent the revolutionary people, 'The Revolution Continues' coalition had to compete with alternative conceptions of the national community. During the parliamentary elections of 2011–12, the Wafd and the Egyptian Bloc sought to represent the idea of a nation based on the union of the Coptic and Muslim communities, while the Muslim Brothers, and even more so the Salafists, were busy embodying a sectarian vision of the people. Almost all of the political forces competing in these elections attempted to embody the 'emotional people' as it manifested itself in January 2011, the most notable exception being the counter-revolutionary camp. Also, the results of the supposedly rational democratic procedures are highly dependent on external factors, especially electoral laws.

The question of diversity and pluralism, as a core component of the people as it appears in revolutionary times, is present in all the articles of this section. Child-martyrdom, as explored by Diana, entails the acknowledgement of the complexity and diversity of the people to the extent that the Egyptian people as a whole, whether they are adults, the young or the youngest, have experienced a *revolution of the self* during the 2010–2011 revolutionary situation. Carle's article highlights the auto-representation of the people as diversified, pluralist, and yet united in a common goal, which consists of the accomplishment of the promises of all the previous revolutions that have taken place in Egypt since Orabi. Steuer reminds us that if the revolutionary conception of the people as an emotional community defines the latter by its diversity and pluralism, one has to remember that the young, educated middle class, the so-called young, *wired* people (Herrera and Sakr, 2014), has often been represented as its vanguard, together with certain other social and political groups. For instance, intellectuals played a major role in the construction of the people

through opinion pieces in the press (Sabaseviciute, 2016). Important roles were also played by other non-traditional political actors such as Ultras and hardcore football-supporters (Dorsey, 2012; Diana in this themed section), and student groups (Diana, 2014; Diana in this themed section). However, the presence of rural and impoverished masses within the revolutionary crowds was necessary in order to make demonstrations successful, and for it to be possible to speak of a ‘revolution of the entire people.’

This social hierarchy is reflected not only in the ‘hierarchy of demands’ (Sabaseviciute, 2016) which can disadvantage revolutionary candidates during parliamentary elections, as Steuer highlights in his article, but also in the process of memorialization of the revolutionary martyr where the latter may merit oversized portraits, or, alternatively, be completely anonymous (Diana in this themed section).

As a matter of fact, the myth of a people united in its plurality contrasts sharply with the permanence of structuring oppositions that manifest themselves strongly in times of elections. For Steuer, revolutionary and electoral times are different, as are the ‘revolutionary’ and ‘democratic’ figures of the people. As an ‘emotional community’, the latter appears only in particular episodes during revolutionary times. Thus, as Carle explores, the people is by essence a temporary entity as it manifests itself only when it takes to the streets.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to thank the ERC funded project “*Political and socio-institutional change in North Africa. Competition of models and diversity of trajectories*” (TARICA, convention n° 695674) and the Oriental Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences which provided them with proofreading services.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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