Beyond failure and success

Revolutions and the politics of endurance

Walid el Houri

I tell it here as a tale of anticapitalist, queer struggle. I tell it also as a narrative about anticolonial struggle, the refusal of legibility, and an art of unbecoming. This is a story without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.

J. Halberstam[1]

In recent years, the themes of failure and disappointment have been increasingly central to both media coverage and academic analysis of protest movements in the 'Arab region' and beyond. The ongoing wars in Syria, Yemen, Libya and Iraq, the violent repression of the Bahraini protests, and the rise of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to power in Egypt with unprecedented levels of repression, have each been instrumental in the growing perception of failure and disappointment as an inevitable fate of the uprisings that erupted in late 2010. Such sentiments and assessments are not limited to this region. We see them also in other contexts and places, for example with regard to the increasing violence of the Turkish State against any form of opposition and the violent campaign against the Kurdish areas in the East, as well as the failure of the Syriza government in Greece to deliver on its promises to oppose austerity and provide an alternative form of governance.

As one disappointment has apparently followed another since 2011, many have consequently argued that the revolutions or uprisings were a mistake, an error that needs to be corrected, or, simply, that they were always bound to fail. Articles with titles like 'The

death of the Arab spring' (*Huffington Post*), 'Egypt's failed revolution' (*World Affairs Journal*), 'The Arab spring is dead' (*RT*) or 'Why Tunisia succeeded while Egypt failed' (*Al Jazeera*) have become a staple of reporting on these places. In what follows, however, I want to challenge such narratives that account for political movements in the terms of straightforward beginnings and ends, failures and successes. Such an approach to analysing political action can hinder the understanding of such practices by already seeing them through prescribed frames of judgement. These narratives can thus become self-fulfilling prophecies, in which normative outcomes are what drive the analysis of their supposed 'results'. Against such simplistic dichotomies, I seek instead to shed light on the relations that exist between different moments, spaces and power structures by emphasising the importance of non-spectacular forms of dissent or oppression in media, space and society. In this way one may consider the *processes* of disruptive practices as part of a politics of endurance that cannot merely be reduced to a normative assessment of final failure or success.

Un-assessing failure

There are of course different 'failures', different scales, different effects and different meanings, and the following is not meant to equate them all, nor to efface differing contexts and conditions by proposing a uniform conception of 'failure' or by romanticising such a notion. It rather seeks to challenge the understanding of failure as a necessary ending, or simple opposite of success, in a normative framework that risks

imposing presupposed endings and assessments on political processes and ongoing movements. Even in such dichotomies, what is a failure or a success depends on who is judging, when, where, why, how, and for whom. Since 2010, a growing number of protests have erupted across the globe some of which share more similarities than others, but all of which seem to be aware of each other. The words and terminology employed to designate these events and processes are various, and include revolutions, insurrections, uprisings, revolts, riots, protests, and so on. In Arabic, another term has been used by some and contested by others: *Thawra* is commonly translated as revolution; it was used in Tunis, Egypt, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria among other places during the 'Arab Spring'. *Thawra* however means more than revolution. It designates eruption, and can be translated also as revolt or uprising. It is a term that denotes a disruption or an action of a certain intensity. While it can be perceived as designating an event, *Thawra* is also a process that implies social upheaval and popular revolt and does not therefore necessarily name forms of protest that would conform to the normative conditions of revolution as institutional change at, for example, the level of the state. Such terminology, chosen by active agents themselves to name their own actions, rather than seeking to categorise a political process through the use of standard terminology, demands an analysis and a theorisation that stems from these actions and processes themselves rather than from pre-existing categories.

The present (and more or less temporary) outcomes of the above protests, in the 'Arab region' as elsewhere, have also varied from one place to another. While in some cases new governments came to power, in others protests were violently suppressed or slowly lost their momentum. In yet other places they turned into wars and armed conflicts of varying degrees of violence. With such present situations commonly being taken for final outcomes, much of the analysis of these events and processes has turned into an assessment of them through the dichotomy of success and failure, using often unstated normative models to identify which event belongs on which side of this divide. In these terms, Tunisia, in particular, is seen as a relative success because the transition of power took place in relative peacefulness and elections were held. Here, the appearance of a functioning parliamentary democracy evidently signifies 'success'. By contrast, the Egyptian revolution is seen to have failed because a new military regime has taken power and is violently repressing dissent and opposition. Syria, Libya and Yemen are no longer called revolutions or uprisings as they have come instead to be denominated as civil wars. Bahrain's short-lived revolution is commonly said to have ended with the military repression that the regime together with the Gulf Cooperation Council launched.

Arguments to support the thesis that there has been a failure to produce genuine political transformation across the region range from pointing out the inability to bring forth regime change, to hold free and inclusive elections and establish a functioning parliamentary democracy, to observing the presence of armed violence and war, the suppression of public mass movements on the streets and the rise of new dictators. The Egyptian revolution, in particular, is thus judged a failure, above all, because (by contrast to Tunisia) it did not bring forth a political system that can be called a parliamentary democracy. However, such assessments do not account for transformations on anything other than the state-institutional level. In the cases of both Egypt and Tunisia there are transformations at stake that can certainly be read as failures or successes, often based on one's own political engagement, but in both cases transformations have also taken place in the ordinary lives of people, in the creation of new signifiers and new networks, which affect the way in which people see themselves in relation to each other and in relation to power. As such, they are part of an ongoing political process that is far from having reached its conclusion, and which have to be considered at the level of more unspectacular practices of dissent, as well as in ways that register the relations between the practices of protest and hegemony as these inform each other. Locating these relationships in the everyday, as well as in new power structures, informs the transformations that take place on the level of communication and media, space and mobility, institutions and social structures, language and values, in Egypt and Tunisia as elsewhere.

The succession of events in Egypt from 2011 until today, from the chants of 'the people want to topple the regime' to the military coup that brought Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to power, at the head of a new military regime more ruthless than the previous one, have framed assessments of the success or failure of the revolution in that country. These events have provoked discussions about the very terminology to be used to describe the events, as well as questions about how that revolutionary moment and drive relates to the outcomes that we have subsequently witnessed. In this way, the Egyptian case is an example (and certainly not the only one) of how political moments are co-opted or appropriated, suppressed or overturned, and how the moments and the practices they involve inform a subsequent political order. Can we then say that the revolution has *failed*?

The problem is that when one declares a process or an event a failure (or a success, for that matter), one implies that an event has already reached its end point; it is past, and it is therefore possible to assess and judge its final outcomes. Yet an investigation of the relation between the moments of disruption of a given order and the hegemonic structures that come to replace it in fact reflects the degree to which politics is always an ongoing process; something which makes forms of endurance an important part of those practices of resistance taking place in everyday life, as well as in more specifically political processes, and in which feelings of disappointment and depression, moments of defeat and demotivation, coexist with the persistence of motivation and political struggle, mobilisation and organisation.

A story of Arab failures

There is a rich Arab history of failure, and of dealing with failure. Much of Arab political thought, and many practical struggles, have revolved around questions of how to respond to perceived failures, at least since colonial times. Consequently, many histories of the region depart from or are punctuated by the Sykes-Picot accords in 1916, the 'Nakba' or the Catastrophe and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948, which led to the declaration of the state of Israel, or the 'Naksa' or the Setback with the spectacular defeat

of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arab nationalist project in the war with Israel in 1967.[2] Generations of Arab intellectuals and activists, especially on the left, have thus been defined in relation to such loss or defeat. 1967 was a turning point in this regard. It marked the failure of the secular Arab nationalist project, one that despite its internal problems and the discrepancy between its myth and the reality on the ground, provided a promise of liberation for millions who believed in it. Much more recently, discussions about the failure or success of the Arab uprisings that erupted in 2010 have resurfaced when many hopes and expectations turned into wars and authoritarian regimes.

The Naksa of 1967 marks a particularly significant defeat for the Arab leftist secular project of national liberation. What some have called the 'trauma of 67' is not simply about a military defeat, it is one that severely impacted generations of Arabs who thereafter had little faith in their ability to act, to be agents. Being Arab came to equate to failure for some; a self-defeating discourse of resignation from history.[3] Academic and political work has regurgitated this idea for decades.[4] The biggest challenge has always been to break with this defeatist, fatalistic idea of failure as an ending – most particular to the leftist and secular movements (and by extension to the regimes, whether monarchical or republican, that have ruled almost all the Arab states) – and the sense of impossibility that has followed from it. The Palestinian Liberation Organisation, but especially the Islamic movements that grew out of the 1967 defeat, have tried to overturn and instrumentalise this defeat in order to claim the validity of Islam as an alternative political project. It is unsurprising that the key slogan that rose in the wake of 1967 was 'Islam is the solution', effectively putting the blame for failure on the secular and non-Islamic character of the liberation movements that preceded them.

Nonetheless, such defeatist thought, and the complacency of regimes accompanying it, was challenged in several instances, most notably during the eruption of the first Intifada in Palestine (1987) but also by Lebanon's Hezbollah whose military (and media) campaigns, leading to the liberation of the south of Lebanon from Israeli occupation in 2000, sought to artic-

ulate a new discourse of empowerment and agency. In turn, the liberation of Southern Lebanon was followed by the second Intifada in Palestine. The revolutionary movements of 2010-11 constitute another break with the post-1967 sense of defeat. These had to do with the role of the political agent on the national level, the individual level, the citizen, and the power of the people in the face of their governments and the institutions of power, its corruption, repression and in some cases their subservience to imperialist institutions, be they military, political or financial. It is significant, in this respect, that the revolutionary gathering repeatedly invoked the notion of dignity in their chants, slogans and demands.[5]

From the promise of the 2010-11 protests to the disappointment of 2013 (and beyond) there is a line, then, that goes back decades and that has defined generations of people living in the so-called 'Arab World'. It is a personal-historical narrative that one finds in some of the contemporary history of Arab political thought, but also in the personal history of many individuals who have participated in or witnessed the events of the last years. This underlying narrative is one that is apparent in the reception, perception and understanding of the events since the eruption of the Tunisian revolution in December 2010 and the subsequent uprisings that took place across the globe. The optimism of 2010-11 was not necessarily naive, or unaware of the challenges to be faced after the fall of the figureheads of the existing regimes. However, when one disappointment followed another and the theme of failure took hold and culminated in 2013, with each new ruling force killing and imprisoning more people than the previous one (with some people cheering them on), the biggest danger was a simple return to a discourse of failure and pessimism, and to the idea that the revolutions were a mistake, an error that needs to be corrected. Once again an older generation of commentators, politicians, academics and public figures re-occupied the screens and the public discourse to say 'we told you so'.[6] Yet, as Judith Butler writes, 'we are also the histories that we never lived, but which we nevertheless transmit in the name of the struggle to preserve the history of the oppressed, and to mobilise that history in our struggle for justice in the present.'[7] The idea of failure is itself one of

those histories in this particular Arab context, which is transmitted from one generation to the other. In this sense, failure also comes with the desire to overturn it, a motivation of sorts and a potential political force that is in turn transmitted.

A politics of endurance

When success and failure are mentioned in political discussions it is generally in reference to normative value systems – as comparisons, sometimes absent comparisons, where the model of success is often based on the numbers and the standards set out by institutions such as the World Bank, the IMF or the United Nations, or by using economic or 'happiness' markers to measure the attractiveness of states to investors, businesses or tourists. Procedural democracy, representational democracy, or democracy *tout court*, have been articulated most frequently as the form and standard of political success. It is political capital in the market of successful states. However, the failure of procedural democracy to fulfil and address the demands and needs of an ever-growing number of disenfranchised people, precarious individuals, 'middle-class poor', protesters and citizens, workers

and peasants, reflects a crisis of governance that is at the heart of many protest movements we see around the world today. The latter can be seen, in this light, as themselves a response to certain failures: the failures of certain states to care for their citizens, the failure of an economic reality that is unjust, the failure to provide a decent life, and so on.

Yet there is something peculiar in speaking of success and failure in the context of political transformation or revolutions: the success of a revolutionary movement in producing a new system is also the moment of its failure to remain revolutionary. In other words the 'failure' of politics *as* politics is not its inability to produce a new order, but precisely its transformation into an order. Politics as destabilisation can lead to the transformation of an existing order or its reproduction, but it is both predicated upon and destined to 'failure' in this sense. 'Politics presides over its own erosion', as Jacques Rancière puts it[8] – a problem that is addressed in his own well-known distinction between politics and police. Rancière defines police as the generally implicit law that regulates bodies and acts on both the bodies and the space in which they exist. It is what draws the line between what would be considered language or discourse and what would be dismissed as simply noise. Politics, on the other hand, names rare moments that disrupt and transform the police order but which can never substitute for it.

The task of politics, then, is precisely to provide new possibilities and spaces for those who are excluded, uncounted and unheard. In this way, protest movements can turn into political moments by making visible what was previously not, and turning what was previously considered noise into a new language. When the Egyptian protests first erupted in January 2011, protestors were demonised by the state media and the official state discourse. They were portrayed as a senseless chaotic force, immature and irrational kids, foreign agents or naive manipulated minds. The demonstrators were also accused of having no real demands or viable project. The state's response was to attempt to silence, suppress and prevent them from voicing their demands at all, from being seen or from being heard. Consequently, with the lack of a space within the system from which to speak or in which to

express themselves, protestors had to create alternative places where they could challenge the regime and its narrative. This was temporarily successful and the protest movement was able to delegitimise the regime, disrupt and destabilise it with their tactics, practices and modes of organisation and being.[9]

This should, then, be taken into account when considering common criticisms of the 2011 protesters for not having a clear programme, or a project for taking power, which, it is argued, thus led to the Muslim Brotherhood, and subsequently the military, coming forth to fill the gap left by this lack of a revolutionary program. This is, for example, what Nasser Abourahme describes as the result of the 'organisational weakness in Egypt's revolutionary street politics': that 'the revolts, by failing to produce a counter-ideological formation, have been a de-subjectification without the necessary symbolic resources for a re-attachment – one offered now by the ascendant and fatherly army chief.'[10] This kind of analysis ignores, however, the question of how forms of authority and hegemonic structures are informed by, react to or are produced by movements of protest; something which is in fact central to any practice of emancipation. Any hegemonic structure is an articulation of frontiers: who belongs and who doesn't, what is inside and what is outside.[11] The shifting of these frontiers to be more or less inclusive always creates new exclusions.

In this sense, hegemonic regimes are the product of a successful anti-hegemonic movement. While, then, there may be no pure politics outside of a police order, a disruption of that existing order always allows for a transformation of the fields of possibility. The emergence of new orders, institutions and exclusions does not signify an end, or a simple conclusion, but an inevitable consequence of politics as a disruption of any police order or an (always unfinished) practice of dissensus.[12]

This is apparent in the new strategies of authority in Egypt where the new regime targets precisely those communities that have established forms of solidarity, organisation and care that are outside of the state structure (workers, slum dwellers, football fans, homosexuals, students, activists, feminists, etc.). Specific practices of dissent, protest and destabilisation of the police order in Egypt lead in this way to a

different order, with new policing mechanisms. Many claims, struggles, protests, demands, political acts, have had an effect on the transformation of the order they are set against, whether by strengthening that order, making it immune to some tactics, or forcing small changes in the order of distribution of power and opening new spaces and new modes of domination or inclusion.

Moments of protest are usually represented and perceived as corporeal, emotional moments of solidarity, group formation, expectations, excitement and mobilisation. However, around those moments and images, whether before or after, are those less visible moments, exclusions and disappointments: institutional moments, bureaucratic and cold, often demotivating and certainly less spectacular. As Ian Alan Paul writes of a 'revolutionary practice of endurance':

> When people protest together … they enter into situations that have unpredictable outcomes by virtue of the diverse individuals involved, introducing noise into an otherwise calm present and creating turbulence where unpredicted futures filled with novel relations can take hold; this noise is what makes resistance possible. The scattered and transversal movements that occur in the noisy aggregation and dis-

aggregation of alliances produce plural futures that dislocate otherwise regulated social and political arrangements.[13]

This raises the question: is institutionalisation, or the moment when a political movement produces new structures (the Greek elections leading to a Syriza government but also the taking of power by the military regime in Egypt), something that destroys the momentum of protest, something that puts an end to the properly political moment, or is it the inevitable outcome to which politics as disruption and endurance necessarily needs (constantly and repeatedly) to respond? Is it necessary for a movement of protest to provide an alternative order, or have the structural ability to become an order, for it to have a positive impact on the reality it sets out to change? In fact, these questions exist as part of the conversations that take place among protesters *themselves*, in various places, and have to do with the choice between adopting a prefigurative politics or a strategic one. While proponents of the first emphasise the importance of the means, and the practices used in the present, proponents of the second claim that the most important aim is taking power in order to be able to provide meaningful change.[14] But is there a possible middle ground between the importance of practices and the priority of strategy without equating party structures or parliamentarianism with the task of politics?

If revolution is to be understood as a total rupture other to any continuity, then, as Paul argues, 'every revolution is an already-failed revolution, always stopping short of completely undoing past injustice.'[15] The present situation in Egypt, or in other places where major protest movements have taken or are taking place, does not mean simply that 'the' revolution has failed. Hanafi makes a similar point when he writes that 'the significance of these revolutions resides in the realisation of social and democratic demands. One should read them as continuities in a long history of protest in the region rather than a total rupture.'[16] These revolutions are, in other words, part of a genealogy that can be traced back years or decades. This genealogy can range from the 2008 worker protests in Gafsa in Tunisia and Mahalla in Egypt back to any moment in the anti-colonial struggle. This is why Hamid Dabashi can describe these revolutionary

movements as being 'driven by a delayed defiance' against the ruling regimes as well as against imperialism and global injustice. These movements are able to impact not only the geopolitical reality in the region, but also elsewhere by triggering and influencing other movements in different locations.[17]

This is to say: failure is part of what makes revolution an exercise in endurance and continuity, 'duration and patience', 'perseverance and stamina', 'a collective technique of producing futures through durational practices in the present'.[18] It is not an ending but a constitutive part of a process of transformation, a constant narrative that is never truly sutured and where everyday practices and unspectacular events are no less important than the spectacular elements of a revolutionary 'aesthetics' such as street battles and demonstrations. These everyday practices that sometimes produce new connections and forms of organisation are part of what Asef Bayat calls the 'quiet encroachment of the ordinary', and are an intrinsic part of what should be thought of as 'politics'.[19]

When imported into political theorising about protest and political action and transformation, failure is usually understood in relation or in opposition to a pre-established value system. However, this could well be challenged by redefining the problem of failure not as a question of ends but as a process intrinsic to politics. Indeed, many of the protest movements seen since 2010 are motivated by, mobilised by and judged through different meanings of failure, vulnerability, oppression or exclusion: failed states, or the failure of state institutions, syndicates or traditional political parties, and their inability to provide channels for people to express grievances or have their demands and needs met. This is not to say that considering failures, their causes and contexts, as practices and processes is about valourising aimless endurance. Rather, it is about recognising the ways in which the articulation of strategies is necessarily informed by their genealogy, and their past 'failures', so as to produce a response to discourses of fatalism and demotivation today.

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Notes

1. Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 88.
2. See Sarah Pursley, 'Lines Drawn on an Empty Map: Iraq's borders and the legends of the Artificial State', *Jadaliyya*, 2 June 2015, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/21759/lines-drawn-on-an-empty-map_iraq%E2%80%99s-borders-and-the; Ilan Pappe, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007).
3. See Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto, 2003); Fouad Ajami, *The Arab Predicament: Arab Political Thought and Practice since 1967* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).
4. See F. Gregory Gause, 'Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring: The Myth of Authoritarian Stability', *Foreign Affairs* 90 (2011), 81.
5. See Asef Bayat, 'A New Arab Street in Post-Islamist Times', *Foreign Policy Blogs*, 26 January 26 2011, http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/26/a_new_arab_street; Sari Hanafi, 'The Arab Revolutions: the Emergence of a New Political Subjectivity', *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 5:2 (2012), 198–213.
6. See Nasser Abourahme, '"The Street" and "the Slum": Political Form and Urban Life in Egypt's Revolt', *City* 17:6 (2013), 716–28.
7. Judith Butler, 'Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions and Street Politics', in *The State of Things*, ed. Marta Kuzma (Oslo: Office for Contemporary Art Norway, 2012), 182.
8. Jacques Rancière, *On the Shores of Politics*, trans. Liz Heron (London and New York: Verso, 2007), 18–19.
9. Hanafi, 'The Arab Revolutions'.
10. Abourahme, '"The Street" and "the Slum"', 718.
11. Cf. Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London and New York: Verso, 2002).
12. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999). Politics is not, then, detached from a context or from a history. On the contrary, a disruptive action is informed by the context in which it takes place, by past experience, and past struggles. It builds on a promise of a future but always takes place in the present to disrupt what is ordinary by various means.
13. Ian Alan Paul, 'The Revolutionary Practice of Endurance', *Jadaliyya*, 25 January 2015, http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/20636/the-revolutionary-practice-of-endurance
14. See Jonathan M. Smucker, 'Can Prefigurative Politics Replace Political Strategy?', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 58 (2014), 74–82.
15. Paul, 'The Revolutionary Practice of Endurance'.
16. Hanafi, 'The Arab Revolutions', 199.
17. Hamid Dabashi, *The Arab Spring: The End of Postcolonialism* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2012).
18. Paul, 'The Revolutionary Practice of Endurance'.
19. Bayat, 'A New Arab Street in Post-Islamist Times'.