The Role of Global Capitalism in the Arab Uprisings and Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement

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Introduction

Comparing the Arab uprisings that began in 2011 and Taiwan’s Sunflower Movement of 2014 seems an almost impossible – even foolish – task. First, could two areas of the world be more different? The two Arab countries considered here, Tunisia and Egypt, are located in North Africa and are, respectively, a former French and a former British colony that became authoritarian governments after independence. The countries feature both urban and rural environments, with Egypt being more rural. Tunisia’s GDP per capita is estimated at US$3,900, and Egypt’s at US$3,600.¹

The Republic of China’s government moved to Taiwan in 1949 after the Chinese Civil War and eventually moved toward democracy. Since the split, Taiwan’s relationship with the People’s Republic of China has been strained and has focused on the question of reunification. Taiwan has a more urban landscape than Tunisia or Egypt, and its GDP is approximately US$22,000 (Knoema 2016).² Thus, with different standards of living, political systems, cultures, languages, and settings, it would seem that the two areas have very little, if anything, in common.

Yet both Taiwan and the Arab world have experienced groundbreaking protest in recent years. In Tunisia and Egypt, the ‘Arab Spring’ culminated in the ousting of four dictators, including Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. In Taiwan, the Sunflower Movement, which saw the Legislative Yuan occupied by protestors for more than three weeks in March 2014, tabled a trade agreement with China and spurred a shift in the political balance of power.

While there are myriad factors that brought about these occasions of protest, one key motivator related to the countries’ economies. Both the Arab world and Taiwan have been confronting the rise and spread of global capitalism over the past several decades. While Taiwan and the Arab world have had very different experiences with capitalism, in both cases of recent protest the demonstrators were particularly concerned with their countries’ economies and the repercussions of certain economic policies – in particular, policies that have supported the freer and freer flow of capital through deregulation and liberalization.

¹ For World Bank data, see: http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD.
² The World Bank does not generally feature data on Taiwan that is independent of the People’s Republic of China.
It is my contention that the continued diffusion of capitalism around the globe and its attendant neoliberal policies have played a direct role in the discontent we have seen – and continue to see – in these disparate regions. Of course, and not unrelatedly, we have been seeing such discontent not only in these two regions over the past years. The United States’ Occupy Wall Street Movement and related anti-austerity movements, such as in Spain and in Greece, illustrated by the July 2015 Greek vote against austerity via a bailout by its international creditors, demonstrate the truly international response to the financial condition.

This global trend is shown in high relief through the cases of the Arab uprisings and the Sunflower Movement. The paper explores this comparison by first examining the economics that brought protestors to the streets of Cairo and Tunis. It then looks at the very divergent historical economic trajectory that brought about Taiwan’s protest movement. Finally, it provides analysis of how the cases overlap in two significant ways and offers concluding thoughts on the future of protest and global capital.

The Economics of the Arab Uprisings

The Arab uprisings began in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, when on 17 December, 2010, a 26-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolated after being humiliated by a police officer. Following the encounter with the officer, Bouazizi had tried to complain at the local government office, but had been turned away. Upon finding that there was no recourse for the way he’d been treated, he bought paint thinner, returned to the building, poured the thinner over himself, and lit a match. He died of his injuries on 4 January. Videos of protests led by Bouazizi’s mother were posted on Facebook and picked up by major news outlets. Massive protests spread across the country calling for the downfall of the country’s dictator, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali – who then fled with his family to Saudi Arabia January 14.

It is perhaps no accident that Bouazizi’s act served as the trigger for what would become a set of protests and uprisings across the region, from Egypt to Libya to Yemen to Syria. While Bouazizi in part committed suicide due to his public humiliation, undoubtedly his inability to make a living, as well as repeated abuse by the authorities (who, according to his family and friends, often took the fruit and vegetables he sold or would fine him for selling without a permit – Ryan 2011), were significant factors.

On the outside, Tunisia looked like it was doing well economically. Like Egypt, it had experienced growth rates of around 4 to 5 percent of GDP per year in the decade before the uprisings (Cammett and Diwan 2013). But these figures belied what was occurring on the ground. Unemployment was high, especially among young people, and income inequality had been on the rise (Tunisia) or had become a more salient way of viewing the structure of society (Egypt) (Achy 2011; Alvaredo and Piketty 2014). By the time of the uprisings in early 2011, Egypt’s youth unemployment rate was 25 percent and Tunisia’s was 30 percent (Schumpeter 2011). Young people like Bouazizi – many of them well-educated, with college degrees – were finding that there were no jobs. The work they could find, such as street vending, was part of the informal economy; it hardly paid the bills and was subject to harassment by the police and other authorities.
While political concerns were part of what drove people to protest in Tunisia and Egypt, economics played a crucial role in setting the stage for the uprisings. Indeed, in a study of survey data regarding the protesters, Mark Beissinger, Amaney Jamal, and Kevin Mazur found that ‘most participants in the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions prioritized economic concerns over desires for civil and political freedoms’ (Beissinger et al. 2013; see also 2015).

To understand how such a ripe situation for economic discontent came about, one must go back to the spread of neoliberalism in the world generally and in the Middle East in particular. As James Gelvin writes, ‘neoliberalism is the name given to a market-driven approach to economics in which the role of the state is kept to a minimum’ (Gelvin 2012). The idea is that the state does not need to ‘disrupt’ economic processes and distribute wealth, because the market automatically and efficiently allocates resources (Heydarian 2014).

This approach to economics took hold in the 1970s, in a period in which formerly booming industrial economies, such as that of the United States, moved into a post-industrial mode of production and strove to maintain the robust economic performance that had occurred on the heels of World War II. David Harvey argues that during this period, ‘throughout the capitalist world, but particularly the United States… capitalist class power was weakening relative to labor and other social movements and capital accumulation was lagging’ (Harvey 2011).

Those in positions of power, such as captains of industry and other wealthy individuals, then went on the ‘counterattack’, setting in motion a new economic framework in which financial operations were deregulated (first nationally and then internationally), deindustrialization took place, and immigration and offshoring weakened labor: ‘Masked by a lot of rhetoric about individual freedom, liberty, personal responsibility and the virtues of privatization, the free market and free trade, [the shift] legitimized draconian policies designed to restore and consolidate capitalist class power’, writes Harvey (Harvey 2011).

The weakening of labor meant – and means – that jobs are exported to areas of the world where companies can find cheaper labor, and that wage repression has taken place for more than 30 years. Harvey notes that in the United States, ‘for the first time in… history, working people have failed to share in any of the gains from rising productivity’ (Harvey 2011).

Gelvin also points to neoliberalism having roots in the United States’ ‘combative’ approach to developing countries’ demands for more control over their raw materials and international economic policy. When oil-producing states, for instance, took control of the pricing and ownership of their product in 1973, the United States pushed back by denouncing any political influence on the free market. When the debt crisis of the 1980s hit, these countries and others in the developing world were in a vulnerable position: ‘States that not so long before had asserted their economic rights were now begging international banking institutions for debt relief’ (Gelvin 2012). These international institutions, such as the IMF and the World Bank, then provided relief, but the price was that the countries had to rejigger their economies in the mold of the U.S. paradigm. This included trade liberalization, deregulation, and the cutting of subsidies.

In the Arab world, state-centered economies (and their practice of subsidies) ‘were dismantled and moved toward export-led industrialization, foreign capital, and the private sector’ (Heydarian 2014). Egypt was the first Arab country to try the
neoliberal experiment, and the president of the World Bank once called Tunisia the region’s ‘best student’ in terms of economic restructuring. In both countries, the employment of neoliberal policies deepened the divide between rich and poor. Gelvin uses a 2008 *Economist* quote to illustrate where Egyptians found themselves several years before the uprising: ‘Today, 44 percent of Egyptians still count as poor or extremely poor, with some 2.6m people so destitute that their entire income cannot cover basic food needs, let alone other expenses’ (Gelvin 2012).

Privatization is a hallmark of neoliberalism, and it helped foster economic discontent in Egypt and Tunisia. While the goal was to create a capitalist system in the two states, what in fact occurred was crony capitalism. Those close to the regimes, including family members, benefited enormously from privatization, as they were able to gain ownership – often at a discount – of state assets. Richard Heydarian argues that such a melding of unaccountable regimes and their political institutions with aggressive pro-market policies created a predatory form of capitalism (Heydarian 2014).

This form of capitalism meant that a very small number of people have gotten very rich, and that there has been an especially small amount of ‘trickling down’ of the wealth. In other words, much of the money remained within a closed system based on nepotism.

Gelvin points to how privatization bred a new social class in Egypt, known as the ‘fat cats’, or more colorfully, ‘whales of the Nile’ – a small group of uber wealthy businessmen who live in gated communities on the edge of the desert, thus avoiding daily contact with the inhabitants of Cairo’s slums. Similarly, neoliberalism has exacerbated the traditional geographic divide in Tunisia that separates the relatively prosperous north and eastern coastline from the poorer inland region. The former area has benefited from an economy built on tourism; the latter, dependent in large measure on small-scale textile production and agriculture, has suffered as a result of the removal of protective trade barriers. (Gelvin 2012)

The majority of Tunisian and Egyptian society began to feel more alienated and more frustrated as they witnessed this phenomenon taking place. Crucially, the middle classes, which had been more aligned with the regimes before the advent of neoliberal reform, began to take issue with these changes, which marginalized them.

Melani Cammett and Ishac Diwan argue that in the decades after colonialism, a significant share of Arab citizens enjoyed socioeconomic gains that raised their aspirations. Statist policies, particularly food and fuel subsidies, ‘facilitated the rise of proto-middle classes’. Such subsidies, they write, resulted in the ‘mass co-optation’ of this segment of society, while the poor were generally left to fend for themselves (Cammett and Diwan 2013).

With neoliberal reforms and the reduction of certain subsidies, starting particularly in the 1990s and 2000s (earlier attempts to reduce subsidies had met with more successful protest and pushback from citizens), the ‘authoritarian bargain’ between elites and the middle class began to crumble. In addition, economic growth, while respectable, was not enough to supply jobs for the growing number of educated
youth who aimed to join the middle class. Heydarian also observes that the kind of reform occurring prioritized retaining low inflation and a balanced budget over inclusive growth and employment generation, thus exacerbating the problem of a glut of youth trying to find work (Heydarian 2014).

Cammett and Diwan note that in the decade before the uprisings, ‘both the poor and the middle classes increased their support for democracy. For the poor, this was linked to a rise in perceptions of inequality. For the middle class, they were more driven by a sense of frustrated aspirations.’ The authors suggest that the concurrent increase in inequality and limited opportunities mixed with a more educated middle class ‘produced a coalition of poor and middle class citizens calling for change’ (Cammett and Diwan 2013). Thus, the sense of economic alienation that the middle classes in Tunisia and Egypt felt in the years prior to the uprisings created a situation ripe for revolt in that the middle class joined the poor in demanding the downfall of their regimes. And this was evident during the ‘Arab Spring’: people from divergent classes and backgrounds joined together in the streets to push for change.

The decline of the agricultural sector spurred a significant number of the poor to demonstrate. In much of the Arab world in the neoliberal era, the state uprooted farmers from their land though a ‘process of legislated immiseration’, argue Rami Zurayk and Anne Gough. In the case of Egypt, this occurred through a 1992 law in which land rents were ‘liberated’, meaning that rents were no longer held at affordable levels for small farmers. After the law, ‘landowning classes reaped the benefits as land rents rose in some places by 400 percent while the cost to purchase agricultural land grew five times over a decade.’ Small farmers were forced to choose between ‘immiseration in rural areas or urban slums’ (Zurayk and Anne Gough 2014).

Another main component in the loose coalition of citizens taking to the streets was workers. In both Tunisia and Egypt, labor activism had been on the rise in the decade before the uprisings, particularly as Hosni Mubarak’s regime continued to implement neoliberal reforms. Workers were frustrated in large part due to privatization and attempts to keep their wages low while inflation rose.

Laborers’ skills in protest and civil disobedience were therefore honed in the years before the Arab Spring. In Egypt, for instance, between 2004 and 2011 more than 3,000 strikes or other labor actions involving more than two million workers and their families took place (Gelvin 2012). Indeed, the moniker of one of the groups that helped to kindle and foster the Egyptian uprising – the April 6 Youth Movement – took its name from the fact that it had formed to support striking textile workers on that date in 2008. Gelvin argues:

> It would not be too far off the mark to say that labor activism became the primary form of resistance to the regime over the course of the decade that preceded the uprisings. Labor thus came to play a key – and some would say pivotal – role in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.

(Gelvin 2012)

Thus, the effects of neoliberalism in Tunisia and Egypt created societies in which large segments of people – youth, current and former farmers, workers, the poor, the middle class, and others – became more and more disillusioned with their economic prospects. While uprisings and revolutions are at base unpredictable, in hindsight it seems clear that the global capitalism-friendly reforms put forth in the
Arab world brought about a combustible situation that was ignited by the spark of Mohamed Bouazizi’s match.

The Economics of the Sunflower Movement

Taiwan has experienced global capitalism in an exceptionally different way than Tunisia and Egypt. In many respects, Taiwan has historically benefited where Tunisia and Egypt have suffered. And yet the complaint of the protestors of Taiwan’s 2014 Sunflower Movement was an economic trade pact with China that the Kuomintang, or KMT, the Taiwanese ruling party at the time, had tried to push through parliament. Both sets of protest movements are hence linked to economic malaise. How else – economically – might the two manifestations of discontent be similar? Or is this loose parallel where the comparison ends?

Taiwan’s capitalist trajectory can be considered from the time of World War II. Conventional thinking about Taiwan’s economic success points to its path from a more agricultural economy (post-World War II) to one focused on import substitution (1950s) to one led by exports (1960s) to one heavily engaged in science and technology (1980s) (Ranis 2007). Such thinking considers Taiwan’s export orientation as the key to its economic success.

The economist Gustav Ranis observes that though Taiwan’s economy was badly damaged after World War II, the agricultural sector retained some coherence and viability. This sector was mobilized and ‘provided the required domestic savings and became the first focus of Taiwan’s export orientation’ (Ranis 2007). Taiwan then went through an import-substitution phase in which agricultural products were exported while everyday goods and machinery were made within the country to replace imports on the domestic market. In the subsequent export-led phase, the country first exported products such as textiles, and then as the industrial sector took off, products from the electromechanical, electric appliance, and plastics industries. By the 1980s, the government was promoting the ‘development of strategic industries that were characterized by a high level of technology’ (Small and Medium Enterprise Administration, Taiwan Ministry of Economic Affairs, n.d.).

Heydarian, a Middle East analyst, points to how Taiwan’s strong industrial and institutional foundations, unlike those in the Arab world, put the country in a good position to ‘reap the benefits of trade liberalization and attract investments from abroad.’ Heydarian also points to how Taiwan’s government adopted the ‘right’ economic strategies by choosing which pro-market reforms to follow, rather than embracing them wholeheartedly – or embracing them while also practicing crony capitalism. ‘It is precisely the balanced form of economic development, with “optimized” levels of economic openness, which explains the high levels of social cohesion, human capital, and political stability [in a newly-industrialized country like Taiwan]’ (Heydarian 2014).

This point about the Taiwanese state’s judicious adoption of certain free market policies has been discussed by economists such as Dani Rodrik, who argued in contradiction to Ranis’s theory that Taiwan’s export orientation did not play a ‘significant causal role’ in the country’s growth since the early 1960s (Rodrik 1994). Rodrik reasoned that the more plausible explanation was the investment boom that took place. And that boom took place because the Taiwanese government
managed to engineer a significant increase in the private return to capital. It did so not only by removing a number of impediments to investment and establishing a sound investment climate, but more importantly by alleviating a coordination failure which had blocked economic take-off. The latter required a range of strategic interventions— including investment subsidies, administrative guidance, and the use of public enterprise…

(Rodrik 1994)

Rodrik notes that government intervention could play this productive role because Taiwan had a well-educated labor force as well as a high degree of income and wealth equality at the time. But the larger takeaway here is that Rodrik demonstrates the value of state intervention in handling globalization and the flow of capital—an argument that rings even truer now that the outcome of excessive deregulation and liberalization was seen in the form of the 2008 U.S.-led global economic crisis.3

Taiwan’s more contemporary period has seen its economy decline—though not egregiously so. But in comparison to its success story of the 1980s and 1990s, Taiwan’s annual GDP growth rate of the last few years has generally hovered around 3 percent instead of 7 or 8 percent (or higher).4 As William T. Wilson writes, ‘While Taiwan remains a wealthy high-tech exporting giant, large cracks are appearing in its gleaming exterior’ (Wilson 2014). Moreover, even though growth has continued to occur over the past decade, real wages have decreased.5

While the international capitalist system from which Taiwan historically benefited plays a fundamental role in this decline, observers and analysts often point to China as the principal reason for Taiwan’s economic woes. And indeed, as Taiwanese firms move to China for cheaper labor, unemployment rises in Taiwan. With this, on top of wage stagnation, many Taiwanese citizens are feeling squeezed financially as well as experiencing a general lack of opportunity. They have also witnessed a growth in inequality due to governmental policies aimed at increasing Taiwan’s trade relationship with China.

Richard Bush notes that in the wake of the normalization of U.S.-Chinese relations in the 1970s, Taiwan and China developed economic links ‘out of mutual self-interest.’ As a result, over the years the two have established a growing business-related association (Bush 2014). The policies of Taiwan’s Ma Ying-jeou administration (2008–2016) and his KMT Party, in particular, aimed to shore up this relationship via trade agreements, such as the 2010 Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement (ECFA). The ECFA, like any free trade agreement, slashed tariffs (in this case, on 539 Taiwanese exports to China and 267 Chinese exports to

3 Dani Rodrik published a book in 2011 in which he follows his line of thinking from the 1994 article on Taiwan. He argues that globalization is beneficial to elites rather than average people, and that global markets require a global governance structure (that does not exist). Rodrik shows that the countries that have benefited the most from global capitalism are those that have not accepted it thoroughly but that have accepted only certain parts of it. See Pearlstein (2011).


5 Lawrence Wang (2010) reports that while Taiwan’s GDP grew approximately 18 percent over the past 10 years (2000–2010), real wages shrank about 4 percent in the same period.
Taiwan). It was seen as the most meaningful agreement since the two sides of the Taiwan Strait divided after the Chinese Civil War in 1949 (BBC News 2010).

While such tools of economic liberalization between Taiwan and China may benefit Taiwanese businesses, they generally only benefit some — particularly, big businesses and the elites associated with them. As T.J. Cheng and Peter C.Y. Chow write,

Taiwan’s trade with and investment in China has generated disproportionate gains—greater gains to big businesses and high-end professionals…and lesser gains to small and medium-sized enterprises and less skilled workers…

(Cheng and Chow 2015)

The disparity between Taiwan’s haves and have nots has thus deepened as a result of increased economic dealings with China. How has this disparity manifested itself in particular?

Though wages have not increased over the years, it does not appear that it is income inequality per se that has been driving the disparity or the discontent that accompanies it. According to Chien-Fu Lin and Hsin-Chan Lu, the Taiwanese government has worked to ameliorate income inequality by advancing social welfare policies for the disadvantaged and increasing taxation for the wealthy. ‘[This] has lifted the incomes of low-income families somewhat’, they note (Lin and Lu 2014).

Rather, the authors point to the skyrocketing price of housing in Taiwan, paired with fewer jobs, as major factors in citizens’ — and especially young citizens’ — frustration ‘over the distribution of economic pie on the island’ (Lin and Lu 2014). Taiwan has extremely high property prices relative to average incomes; as such, individuals’ wealth (versus income), which includes ownership of property, is more of an indicator of inequality.

Lin and Lu also report that Taiwan has a high proportion of college-educated citizens, adding that over the past decade the number of students earning BAs has doubled, MAs tripled, and PhDs quadrupled. ‘[This] leads to a surplus of highly educated labor… and a lowering value [of this labor]’ (Lin and Lu 2014). As a result, in addition to the industrial jobs that have moved to China due to its cheaper labor, when young Taiwanese graduate with advanced degrees, they find it hard to secure work. And even if they land positions, wages have stagnated, making it difficult to purchase a home or live a comfortable lifestyle — unless one’s family already has wealth, reinforcing the divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

The inequality found within Taiwanese society can be found more broadly in the relationship between China and Taiwan. Over the years, as China has risen economically and Taiwan has declined, Taiwan has become more and more dependent on China in terms of flows of trade, investment, and people. China has emerged as Taiwan’s largest trading partner, and while China has become increasingly significant for Taiwan’s exports, Taiwan’s importance for Chinese exports has been decreasing. As such, the ECFA can open up China to Taiwanese businesses, but it can also ‘over time… make Taiwan even more dependent on the Chinese market’ (Wilson 2014).

This situation has made many Taiwanese nervous, not only about the economic but political implications of dependence on China — or indeed, how economic
dependence could bring about political dependence. While the KMT Party worked to shore up economic relations with China while keeping Taiwan politically independent (Bush 2014), the opposition Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) billed itself as more cautious in its approach to ramping up economic liberalization between the two sides of the Strait. As Richard Bush observed: '[T]he DPP has been reserved about increasing interdependence with China' (Bush 2014).

This was the political climate in which Taiwan found itself when the KMT, in March 2014, tried to push the Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) through parliament without a review. The CSSTA, the latest in a series of trade pacts with China of which the ECFA had been the most prominent, was to allow Chinese investment in ‘sensitive’ industries, including telecommunications and publishing. The KMT, according to a June 2013 agreement with the DPP, was supposed to engage in an item-by-item review of the CSSTA, but it reneged and instead declared that the review period was over and that the bill would be put to a plenary session on 21 March (Rowen 2015).

In response, several hundred student activists and their supporters stormed Taiwan’s parliament and occupied it for 24 days in a bid to stop the agreement; the occupation was named the Sunflower Movement. A number of the protestors were against the agreement itself; according to Ian Rowen, they ‘expressed particular concern for the impact that greater Chinese penetration in Taiwan’s economy would have on the island’s small- and medium-sized businesses, media culture, and freedom of expression.’ Others claimed to be more agitated by the fact that the KMT had acted in an intransparent and authoritarian manner. These protestors ‘stress[ed] that they were not against trade or globalization per se, but were opposed to opaque agreements advanced by an administration without a popular mandate’ (Rowen 2015).

The CSSTA was ultimately tabled due to the Sunflower Movement, with the government promising to grant parliament more oversight of cross-strait trade pacts (AFP 2016). (The terms of this oversight were still being debated at the time of writing.) The KMT experienced a serious defeat in the mid-term local elections in November 2014 to the benefit of the DPP, and the DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen won the 2016 presidential election. The Sunflower Movement’s broad base has fragmented into a number of groups, though Sunflower-affiliated parties won some seats in the November elections.

Hence the DPP appears to have gained the most from the Sunflower Movement, at least for now. But the DPP now occupies a precarious position, particularly because at base it agrees with the KMT that trade liberalization is the answer to Taiwan’s sagging economy. Tsai has said that Taiwan will seek closer trade relations with Asian nations other than China. However, it will be hard for Taiwan to disengage economically from China regardless of Tsai’s intentions; 40 percent of Taiwan’s exports, which comprises 70 percent of GDP, currently go to China first (Panda 2016). The DPP thus must walk the same tightrope as the KMT in terms of dealing economically with China and keeping Taiwan politically empowered.

While Taiwan appears to have benefited early on from a shrewd approach to global capitalism, it is now facing a situation in which the accelerated implementation of neoliberal policies over the past 20 years has pushed it on a new economic path. Taiwan is currently seen as economically isolated due to its non-participation in a large number of free trade agreements; this puts pressure on it to engage in such
liberalization to keep up with countries in the region and beyond. And, as China has grown and Taiwan has shrunk, the view of China as the culprit in this race that Taiwan seems to be losing – rather than the global system – has taken hold of the populace and spurred the Sunflower Movement.

With both the Arab world – specifically Tunisia and Egypt – and Taiwan plunging forward into a more and more liberalized, deregulated free-market global system, what similarities might we draw from what are – on the surface – extremely different cases?

Analysis: Overlaps Despite the Disparities

We have seen how the Arab world, focusing in particular on Egypt and Tunisia, and Taiwan have experienced exceedingly different trajectories when it comes to global capitalism and neoliberalism. While Taiwan benefitted initially from the economic system that was initiated and fueled by the United States, it has more recently seen a downturn in its economic growth as well as an increase in inequality – an oft-prevalent feature of postindustrial societies. As for Tunisia and Egypt, while they also adopted neoliberal policies, they have engaged more in a form of capitalism based on a closed system of elitism and nepotism. Today, though Tunisia’s and Egypt’s economic systems are still incredibly different from that of Taiwan (while of course divergent from one another as well), all three countries have seen waves of deep protest in large part driven by economic concerns.

The Arab examples and Taiwan in some ways find themselves at a similar crossroads though they have come to it through different paths. Because economic liberalization and deregulation generally benefit big business and elites at the expense of small and medium-sized enterprises and lower-level workers, those countries that have fostered such policies are now seeing similar issues affect their citizens. In Tunisia, Egypt, and Taiwan, issues such as wage stagnation, well-educated youth who cannot find good jobs, and high housing and food prices are what brought thousands to millions to the streets in protest. This also accounts for surges of protest the world round, such as the Occupy Wall Street Movement and numerous others.

Aside from the fact that neoliberal policies helped to create these conditions, the other similarity that the Arab countries and Taiwan shares is that their populations, while incensed enough by their political and economic situations to bravely organize and demonstrate en masse, did not generally call for a reboot of the global capitalist system. While they indeed wanted real change, perhaps even desiring to not be governed by capitalist infrastructures and organization, this desire did not translate into a call to replace the capitalist system.

Maya Mikdashi, in a piece on neoliberalism and the Egyptian revolution, notes that ‘rather than demanding the end of neoliberal market practices, demonstrators demanded the reform of those practices and assurances that economic opportunity would be shared more widely’ (Mikdashi 2011). Further, those groups who first took power in Tunisia and Egypt after the uprisings—Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood, respectively – were quick to reassure the United States and Europe
that they would ‘continue to embrace free market capitalism’ (Zurayk and Gough).\textsuperscript{6} Today, in the more democratic Tunisia and the again authoritarian Egypt, leading forces are still following similar economic policies.

In Taiwan, many protestors were also concerned about getting a larger piece of the economic pie. However, contrary to the Arab cases, this concern focused particularly on China as the threat. Shelley Rigger has said that this clear vision of China’s role in Taiwan’s troubles has helped the Taiwanese to stand up for their rights: ‘Because China looms so large for [the Taiwanese], both economically and politically, they have been able to brush aside the obfuscations and learned helplessness that are immobilizing their counterparts in other countries and demand that their government protect them.’ While this may be true, Rigger adds that ‘it’s not really China that’s driving economic malaise – it’s globalization and twenty-first-century capitalism… I’m not sure that refusing to integrate further with the PRC will solve their problems’ (Wasserstrom 2014).

As such, refusing to, for example, facilitate the flow of capital through free trade agreements in general, and not just with China, would be a more profound statement. It would indeed be rebellious, as much of the current academic and policy discourse surrounding Taiwan’s economic troubles emphasizes its failure to enter into such agreements – if not with China, then with other countries or blocs – and the need for it to do so to remain competitive (discussed in Bush 2014; Wilson 2014; Cheng and Chow 2015).\textsuperscript{7} And as Rowen points out in his work on the Sunflower Movement, a significant number of those who participated in the protests stressed that they were not in fact against free trade pacts with China (or with any other country), but simply wanted a more transparent governmental process to vet such agreements (Rowen 2015).

In sum, in Egypt and Tunisia, protestors condemned crony capitalists. And in Taiwan, many protestors couched their discontent in terms of either economic or political problems with China, or in terms of how the government had been handling economic relations with China in an authoritarian manner. Thus neither set of demonstrators called for a fundamental alteration in how their country engages with the global capitalist system, or with the system itself, but for lesser alterations within that system.

**Globalization, Neoliberalism, and Protest: Where to Go from Here?**

Gelvin, in reference to the Arab world, states that ‘since neoliberal policies sparked widespread anger throughout the region, further neoliberal policies are unlikely to defuse it’ (Gelvin 2012). And further neoliberal policies are indeed on the current agenda. Heydarian similarly argues that the success of the Arab Spring hinges on post-uprisings governments ‘adopt[ing] appropriate economic policies to redress the great divide between the minority elite and the majority of the population… given the

\textsuperscript{6} In February 2012 at the Middle East Institute at the National University of Singapore, a group of Egyptian Muslim Brothers met with faculty and staff and also assured the small audience that they would continue to work with the IMF and World Bank (Kirk 2012).

\textsuperscript{7} It should be noted that while GDP growth may occur as a result of such trade agreements, wages and jobs are unlikely to increase for the general population.
neoliberal bent of elements within the new post-revolutionary leadership… it is far from clear [that this will occur]’ (Heydarian 2014). It seems inevitable that without any substantive changes in economic policy occurring in Egypt or Tunisia, discontent is unlikely to abate. Tunisia’s coalition government and Egypt’s revamped authoritarian regime led by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi – or their successors – will likely ultimately be held accountable for this deficiency.

In Taiwan, the CSSTA has been tabled, and a bill that would establish a process to monitor Taiwan’s pacts with China before a vote also remains stalled (Mao and Lin 2016). But whether or not the CSSTA is passed, both the KMT and the DPP fundamentally believe that Taiwan must enter into free trade agreements and other liberalizing practices to shore up the economy. As a result, similar to the situation in the Arab world, it is unlikely that there will be substantive changes made that could ameliorate the economic issues that in part brought about the Sunflower Movement. The DPP may be held more accountable for this failure to create change due to its newfound power paired with its self-presentation as cautious regarding cross-strait trade relations.

Further, while there has been a degree of international cooperation in terms of protest (for instance, Tunisians gave Egyptians advice via Facebook on how to deal with tear gas [Kirkpatrick and Sanger 2011], and activists from Taiwan flew to Hong Kong to support the protesters there [Sui 2014]), such collaboration has not culminated in an international – or even regional – call for a rethinking of globalization and economics. And international leaders, even when they acknowledge the problem of ‘the one percent’, deal with the problem in a solely rhetorical sense. ‘When you look at actual policies’, says Harvey, ‘you see that they’re deepening inequalities’ (Derbyshire 2014).

Is there no hope? Are the protest movements that have been occurring across the globe in places like New York City, London, China, and Brazil – as well as the Arab world and Taiwan – too weak (at least in terms of calling for economic restructuring or re-regulation) and too unconnected to put any real pressure on leaders to transform the system into one that works toward a truly more egalitarian distribution of wealth? While Harvey says the varied movements are ‘ephemeral’ and ‘haven’t coalesced into something substantial’, he nevertheless retains a bit of optimism: ‘There is something in motion out there that is the source of some hope’ (Derbyshire 2014).

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