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Theorizing revolution in democracies

Evidence from the 2019 uprisings in Lebanon and Iraq

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Abstract: Scholarly logic holds that revolutionary movements are unlikely to break out in democracies, where citizens may simply remove unpopular leaders through elections. And yet the twenty-first century has witnessed a global series of uprisings against regimes that are nominally democratic—in that they regularly hold competitive elections—but are otherwise deeply broken, run by kleptocratic networks of elites who often fail to deliver vital services. This paper therefore takes on the task of theorizing revolution in democracy, pointing to some of the ways in which these movements differ from well-studied revolutionary movements in consolidated autocracies. We analyse two recent cases—the Tishreen uprising in Iraq (2019–20) and the Lebanese Thawra (2019–20)—and draw on original protest event catalogues constructed from local Arabic-language newspapers. We argue that the decentralized nature of these regimes may paradoxically render the task of deposing them via mass mobilization more difficult. We investigate mechanisms including the difficulty of sustaining a broad anti-regime coalition in the absence of a singular dictator, the ability of elites to offer resignations without fundamentally altering underlying power structures, and the possibility for an array of non-state and semi-state repressive actors to repress protests.

Key words: Lebanon, Iraq, protest, revolution, democracy, protest event catalogue

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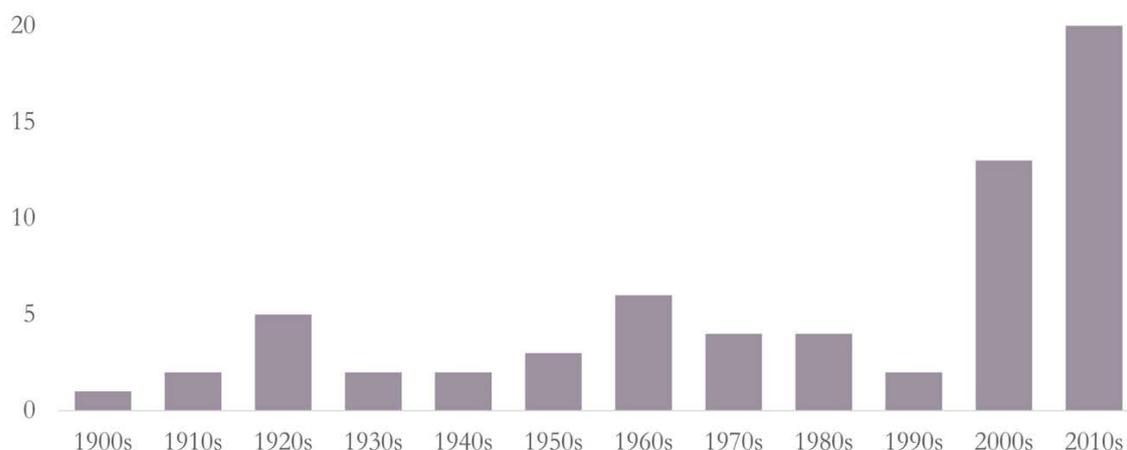
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1 Introduction

Revolutions are not supposed to happen in democracies. Democratic governments that have failed to provide for their citizens can be removed through the institutional channel of elections, mitigating the need for the type of difficult mass mobilization and non-institutionalized resistance that is normally required to force out a dictator. This logic has been borne out in multiple empirical studies of revolution, which have found that throughout history, revolutionary movements are far less likely to break out in democratic countries (Beissinger 2022; Chenoweth 2021; Goodwin 2001).

And yet, as shown in Figure 1, a series of global uprisings over the last decade are beginning to call this long-established consensus about revolution and democracy into question. In nearly 20 democracies, ranging from Eastern Europe to Latin America to the Middle East, mass anti-government movements have broken out that embrace the repertoires, the claims-making strategies, and even the vocabulary of revolution. All of these movements have taken on regimes that are nominally democratic—in that they regularly hold competitive elections—but are otherwise deeply broken, run by kleptocratic networks of elites who rule on behalf of themselves and their cronies rather than everyday citizens. In these regimes, institutions of democratic representation and accountability have broken down to such an extent that citizens have decided to call for their wholesale dismantlement and reconstruction.

Figure 1: Revolutions occurring in nominally democratic states (where Polity > 5)



Note: a Polity score of > 5 is generally understood to indicate a democratic regime.

Source: authors' construction based on Beissinger (2022) revolutions dataset and Centre for Systemic Peace (2021) Polity IV dataset.

Because revolutions in democracies have historically been rare, there is little work theorizing or analysing their unique dynamics and logics. This paper therefore takes on the task of theorizing revolution in democracy, pointing to some of the ways in which these movements might differ from well-studied revolutionary movements in consolidated autocracies. On the one hand, we might expect broken democracies to afford more political space for social movements to organize, making it easier to launch revolutions than in repressive autocracies. But we argue that other features of these regimes, particularly their decentralized power structure, may paradoxically undermine the process of revolutionary mobilization and dampen prospects for revolutionary success.

First, we argue that revolutions in democracies are likely to struggle to form and sustain ‘negative’ revolutionary coalitions. Whereas power in autocracies is consolidated in the hands of a single dictator, in broken democracies power is usually shared by a host of political elites knitted together in networks of privilege and corruption. The absence of a single dictator who personifies the regime makes revolutionary ‘success’ harder to define and undermines the formulation of clear, lowest-common-denominator goals that can hold together a diverse coalition. Second, the decentralized nature of power in broken democracies means that repression may emanate not just from the state but also from various pseudo-state and non-state actors with an interest in preserving the status quo. This can make it difficult to pin down responsibility or blame for major repressive acts, undermining the ability of protesters to generate outrage in response to state violence—a crucial mechanism by which unarmed protesters in autocracies cultivate new supporters and forge elite alliances. For both of these reasons, we propose that revolutions in democracies may, paradoxically, have a harder time achieving real regime change than revolutions in consolidated autocracies.

We advance these arguments by analysing two recent cases of revolution in broken democracies: the Tishreen uprising in Iraq (2019–20) and the Lebanese Thawra (2019–20). These cases are emblematic of the rising tide of revolutions in democracies that we have seen globally over the last decade. Both countries have regimes that are nominally democratic, in that they regularly hold elections that are fiercely contested and in which the winner is not known at the outset. But these elections consistently fail to produce governments capable of governing on their citizens’ behalf. Instead, corrupt political elites have formed a system of collusive power-sharing, where they agree to divide up the spoils of government in order to enrich themselves and their cronies. Fed up with these systems of institutionalized corruption, revolutionary movements in both countries took to the streets in 2019 to call for their downfall and the removal of the entire political class. We study these two movements using original protest data that we collected from local, Arabic-language news sources in each country ($n = 3,295$ in Lebanon; $n = 2,641$ in Iraq). These protest event catalogues allow us to trace the changing contours of mobilization, claims-making, and state response across the full arc of these two revolutionary movements.

The protest data reveal a number of empirical trends and relationships that support the theoretical claims above. First, the data allow us to periodize the two uprisings into four phases: revolutionary escalation, dispersion, frustration and resuscitation, and demobilization. In phase one—revolutionary escalation—we see dynamics that are reminiscent of revolution in consolidated democracies: the emergence of a negative coalition rallied around a clear lowest-common-denominator demand of government opposition. But this initial momentum collapsed in both cases when the countries’ prime ministers resigned. At that point, the revolutions entered a phase of dispersion (where demands became diverse and fluid), followed by a brief and frustrated effort to resuscitate the revolution through calls for the formation of a new government. This phase was then followed by a long period of demobilization, when protest levels declined and demands again became diffuse.

Patterns in state response also bear out some of the central elements of our theoretical arguments. Both countries experienced major repression of protest, especially Iraq, where tens of thousands were injured and hundreds were killed. Moreover, we see a clear pattern in both countries of repression by non-state or pseudo-state actors. These actors were tied to various political groups within the regime—in Iraq the Iranian-backed Hashd al-Shaabi militias and in Lebanon the Shi’a parties Hezbollah and Amal—whose interests were particularly threatened by the revolution. We find that in both countries these actors were more likely to be deployed against certain modes of protest—against occupations/sit-ins in both countries, and against events in which protesters embraced unarmed violence in Iraq. The data also reveal that repression involving these actors was more likely to result in protester injury or death than repression involving the police. These

relationships suggest that in both uprisings, political elites turned to non-state actors for repression when they felt especially threatened by disruptive or long-term protests, or when they wished to avoid direct responsibility for particularly violent crackdowns.

2 Democracy and revolution

Scholars broadly agree that revolutions rarely occur in democracies. Here, by revolution, we mean an extra-institutional effort to change an existing regime through the mass mobilization of everyday citizens.¹ Democracies are expected to be relatively immune to revolution because, unlike autocracies, they afford citizens institutional channels for expressing grievances and making claims. Given that revolution is a high-risk and costly undertaking, most citizens living in democratic regimes would prefer to voice their concerns through the institutional channel of elections, or through social movements focused on reforming the system rather than replacing it.² Though democracies certainly do use violence against dissidents (Davenport 2007), on the whole they are less likely to respond to social movements with overwhelming force. As such, democracies are less likely to trigger the kind of backlash mobilization that can push people to embrace revolution (Goodwin 2001).

The absence of revolutions in democracies has been noted by multiple generations of revolution scholars. Huntington wrote that ‘the absence of successful revolutions in democratic countries remains a striking fact, and suggests that, on the average, democracies have more capacity for absorbing new groups into their political systems than do political systems where power is equally small but more concentrated’ (Huntington 1968: 275). Goodwin similarly noted that no revolution ‘has ever overthrown a consolidated democratic regime’ (Goodwin 2001: 300), and that ‘even imperfect and poorly consolidated democracies tend to diffuse revolutionary pressures’ (Goodwin 2001: 303). Beissinger explains that revolutions rarely break out in democracies because ‘revolutionary movements that seek to overthrow democracies confront the question of why large numbers should take the extraordinary risks associated with revolution when they could wait out the regime until it must submit itself for approval at the ballot box’ (Beissinger 2022: 159).³ And Chenoweth explains that non-violent revolutionary campaigns are much rarer in democracies because ‘people already have a political pressure valve’ in the form of elections (Chenoweth 2021: 126)

And yet, in the last decade a wave of uprisings across multiple continents has called this conventional wisdom into question. A host of countries that we would normally consider democracies—in that they have regular competitive elections between rival political groups—have witnessed popular movements making claims that, in many cases, amount to regime change.⁴ In Central American countries such as Honduras, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, protest coalitions have called for the resignation of corrupt and unaccountable presidents, and in Guatemala this resulted

¹ This understanding of revolution follows a long line of scholarship that sees it as a particular mode of regime change (Beissinger 2022; Goldstone 2001; Goodwin 2001; Lawson 2019; Tilly 1978), rather than as a process involving radical transformation of state and society (Huntington 1968; Levitsky and Way 2022; Skocpol 1979).

² On the differences between social movements and revolutions, see Goldstone (1998); McAdam et al. (2001); Tilly (1978).

³ As Staniland (2020) points out, leftist insurgencies in developing-world democracies may be the one exception to this trend.

⁴ For a full list of these cases see the Appendix.

in the ouster of President Pérez Molina. Deep-seated corruption among political elites was also a major issue in a series of uprisings that swept the Balkan region from 2014 to 2019, where the fledgling democracies that emerged after the Cold War have struggled to consolidate. Similar issues were also at play nearby in the Romanian ‘White Revolution’ of 2017 and the ‘Moldovan Maidan’ of 2015. And in 2019—a year that some have branded the most revolutionary in decades (Chenoweth et al. 2019)—uprisings broke out over austerity, corruption, and state violence in democratic regimes ranging from Iraq and Lebanon to Chile and Bolivia to Albania and Montenegro. Indeed, two separate studies have noted that dissatisfaction with poorly performing democracies has been one of the primary drivers of a rising tide of protest campaigns over the past decade (Chenoweth 2021: 225; Ortiz et al. 2021: 21). Democracies, it seems, are no longer immune to revolution.

These uprisings all share a number of features. Their claims reflect a similar constellation of grievances—entrenched corruption, neoliberal economic policies, and lack of political accountability—which can be traced back to commonalities in the structure of the regimes they target. All of them are nominally democratic, in that they hold regular competitive elections which are mostly free and fair. But despite their democratic trappings, these regimes have many features that we would more normally associate with autocracies. They are run by narrow coalitions of elites bound together through networks of corruption and privilege, who rule in order to enrich themselves and their cronies rather than to benefit their constituents. When an entire political class is bound together in these type of narrow and unaccountable networks—what Slater and Simmons (2013) call ‘party cartels’—elections no longer offer a meaningful mechanism for holding office-holders accountable or making policy preferences known. Recognizing that these institutions are broken beyond repair, citizens in these countries have taken to the streets to call for their wholesale dissolution and replacement.

Calling for the removal of an entire political class and the transformation of a political system is tantamount to calling for regime change. And if revolution entails regime change through mass mobilization, then at least some of these movements clearly rise to that level. Of course, just as we are unused to thinking about revolutions occurring in democracies, we are also unused to applying the term ‘regime change’ to these types of cases. In the past, ‘regime change’ has mostly been used to describe a political transition from authoritarianism to democracy. But as Geddes et al. (2017) have pointed out, regime change can take other forms as well; autocracies, for example, can be replaced by new autocracies (e.g., the Islamic Republic in Iran replacing the Pahlavi monarchy). Similarly, we propose, if a broken democracy is removed and replaced by a democracy with working institutions of accountability and deliberation, then this transformation surely also counts as regime change. The uprisings sweeping the Global South over the last decade have raised precisely such claims, and therefore, we propose, ought to be considered among the same class of events as revolutions against consolidated autocracies or hybrid regimes (e.g., the Arab Spring revolutions, the ‘coloured revolutions’, and the revolutions at the end of the Cold War).

3 Revolutionary mobilization and state response in democracies

Even if many of the uprisings in democracies over the last decade do rise to the level of revolution, we should not necessarily expect patterns of revolutionary mobilization and state response to be identical in these contexts. Though these broken democracies are run by elites bound together in party cartels and/or close networks of corruption, they still exhibit far more decentralization of power than the autocracies or hybrid regimes that have historically been the main targets of revolution. One of the main ways in which autocracies differ from democracies is in their centralization of power and the narrowness of their ruling coalitions (Buono de Mesquita et al.

2003; Geddes et al. 2017; Svobik et al. 2012). In autocracies, power is concentrated in the hands of a single dictator, who relies on a close circle of loyal elites to assist in executive decision-making and maintaining social control in exchange for a share of the spoils of rule. In democracies, power is far less centralized, with rival groups of elites competing for votes through an electoral process that gives the winner the right to control the government. Even in broken democracies like the ones described above, there is much less concentration of power than in autocracies. Though elite circles may be narrow, rival factions collusive, and networks tight-knit, there is still no single autocrat who sits at the apex of these elite circles, managing rivalries and doling out favours and responsibilities. The decentralized and networked nature of ruling coalitions in these regimes has important theoretical implications for how we might expect revolutionary mobilization to unfold and the state to respond.

Scholars of unarmed and non-violent revolution have argued that these types of campaigns exhibit a consistent set of strategies and that they achieve success in broadly similar ways (Beissinger 2022; Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Goldstone 2014; Lawson 2019; Nepstad 2011; Schock 2005).⁵ First, they try to draw in as many participants as possible by constructing what are called ‘negative coalitions’ (Beissinger 2013; Dix 1984). These coalitions are ‘negative’ because they involve diverse participants with a range of ideologies and goals who agree on little other than their antipathy towards the ruling dictator. By focusing on this reviled incumbent and framing their demands around the single lowest-common-denominator goal of his ouster, these movements seek to draw in as wide and diverse a group of participants as possible. Second, recognizing that they cannot match the regime’s coercive power, these movements instead try to leverage their moral power over the incumbent. Specifically, they take advantage of the outrage that naturally follows when the incumbent’s security forces use violent repression against unarmed protesters, to draw in new supporters, expand their mobilization, and cultivate potential allies. Finally, these revolutions use the combination of this moral outrage and mass participation to elicit defections from the autocrat’s narrow ruling elite, especially from the military (Chenoweth and Stephan 2012; Goodwin 2001; Schock 2005; Tilly 1978). If ruling elites defect in sufficient numbers and come over to the side of the revolution, the autocrat may conclude that the game is up and resign.

As is clear, the centralization of power that is the hallmark of autocratic rule is a crucial feature of this model. First, the ability to construct and sustain a broad ‘negative coalition’ hinges on the presence of a single reviled dictator, whose ouster forms the basis for a clear lowest-common-denominator goal that all participants can agree on. Second, violent acts of repression can clearly and indisputably be tied back to regime, and therefore to the autocrat. This facilitates the generation of outrage, since blame is easy to pin on a single individual.

But if the target of mobilization is not a centralized autocracy headed by a single dictator but instead a broken democracy headed by networks of collusive and corrupt political elites, we might imagine these aspects of the unarmed revolution model to work differently. On the one hand, we might expect the decentralization of power to provide more political space for activists to organize, form coalitions, and hone their tactics and demands. One of the greatest challenges to building revolutionary movements in consolidated autocracies, which typically have extensive powers of repression, surveillance, and co-optation, is that they tend to drastically limit the space for political organizing and punish those who seek to challenge them. Broken democracies may be unaccountable and corrupt, but they do not typically exert the same degree of heavy-handed

⁵ Given that all of the uprisings against democracies in the last decade have been unarmed, this is the revolutionary strategy that would seem to be most theoretically relevant for these cases. An alternative strategy of revolution involves defeating the incumbent’s military through armed guerrilla warfare (typically in the countryside). On the differences between armed and unarmed revolution, see Beissinger (2022); Chenoweth and Stephan (2012).

control over civil society and social movements. The relative openness of these countries might therefore make it easier for activists to build movements capable of launching revolutionary challenges.

But other features of these democratic regimes might make the process of revolutionary mobilization paradoxically more challenging than in autocratic settings. First, the absence of a single leader who personifies and controls the regime can make it difficult to construct and sustain a broad negative coalition. These revolutions are waged against a system of corrupt institutions and practices, and though certain reviled figures might be emblematic of that system, there is no one figure to whom it can be tied, as there is in an autocracy. In a broken democracy, certain regime officials—a prime minister, a major party leader—can resign or be ousted without the system itself coming under serious strain. Indeed, the collusive and networked nature of these regimes means that official positions can be rotated easily without affecting the underlying distribution of power. The same cannot be said of most autocratic systems, which typically cannot survive the ouster of the dictator. A related issue is that ‘success’ in a revolution targeting a democratic regime is poorly defined. In an anti-autocratic revolution success is usually understood to be the fall of the dictator, and all of revolutionaries’ strategies, energies, and claims-making are focused on this clear and singular goal. The same is not the case in a revolution targeting democracy, where the resignation of a single leader rarely amounts to systemic change. Indeed, systemic change is itself a multivalent type of claim, open to interpretation by different revolutionary groups and actors. It is, in other words, not the kind of lowest-common-denominator demand that is amenable to the construction and maintenance of a negative coalition.

A second implication of the more decentralized power structure in these regimes is that repression will not always emanate from the state. Autocratic regimes rely disproportionately on official state organizations—the police, the security services, the gendarmerie, and the army—for repression. Even when they do occasionally outsource repression to non-state actors such as thugs or militias (e.g., Ong 2018), there is usually little question as to who is behind these actors. But in broken democracies the lineages of repression may be harder to trace. Democratic regimes may well rely on the typical organs of state violence—the police, the military, etc. But political actors within these regimes may have access to their own tools of violence, and if they feel sufficiently threatened they may deploy them to put down protesters. Repression in these cases can, in this sense, be messier and murkier. Some repressive action may easily be tied to the central government, but some of it may be more difficult to trace, making it harder to pin down responsibility. This can undermine one of the main mechanisms that unarmed protesters use to cultivate supporters and allies: the generation of outrage in response to egregious acts of state abuse. It also potentially gives these regimes a more varied set of repressive strategies with which to quell protest, using state and non-state actors in various lethal combinations to demobilize certain types of protesters and elicit fear and uncertainty within revolutionary movements.

In the sections that follow, we evaluate and further develop these theoretical propositions about the nature of revolution and state response in broken democracies. We do so using two recent cases of revolution against broken democracies: Lebanon’s and Iraq’s 2019 uprisings. In the next section, we further explain the logic behind this case selection and also lay out the data and empirical strategy that we use to substantiate these arguments.

4 Data and methods

4.1 Case selection

The Lebanese Thawra and the Iraqi Tishreen uprising erupted within weeks of one another in the fall of 2019 and unfolded in starkly similar ways over the subsequent months. The similarities in these trajectories can be traced, in part, to a number of commonalities in the two countries' political systems. Both countries are broken democracies, in the sense described above. They hold regular elections contested by multiple political parties in which the outcome is not known in advance.⁶ But these different parties are headed by deeply corrupt elites and have long failed to provide citizens with meaningful representation or policy alternatives. Instead, these elites collude to share power and enrich themselves, making them good examples of 'party cartels' (Slater and Simmons 2013). Because the governments are set up to benefit their members and not everyday citizens, basic public service provision in these countries has grown woefully poor, with major breakdowns in services like electricity, garbage collection, and gas provision. Further, both states share a history of violent domestic conflict and foreign invasion, with current governmental structures designed in a post-war context to facilitate inter-sectarian power-sharing. In short, these are two emblematic recent cases of revolution in broken democracies, and they therefore offer a valuable opportunity to evaluate and develop the theoretical propositions laid out in the sections above.

4.2 Protest event data

Our main empirical data come from two original protest event catalogues covering the periods September 2019 – April 2020 in Lebanon ($n = 3,295$) and Iraq ($n = 2,641$). Per Charles Tilly, who pioneered the use of event catalogues to study trends in contentious politics, 'an event catalog is a set of descriptions of multiple social interactions collected from a delimited set of sources according to relatively uniform procedures' (Tilly 2002: 249). Our event catalogues are designed to capture contentious events—i.e., public, collective, and voluntary endeavours involving a group of people trying to influence the actions or policies of some authority.⁷ These events include protests, marches, demonstrations, strikes, sit-ins, riots, and roadblocks. For each event, we record a series of covariates including primary demands, violent and non-violent tactics, size of the event, protesting organizations, and repressive response.

In line with recent methodological writing on event catalogue construction in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, we have sourced our event catalogues from an array of local, mainly Arabic-language newspapers. In comparison with off-the-shelf event datasets, such as ACLED (Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project) and SCAD (Social Conflict Analysis Database), datasets based on local sources are known to capture more events, to record event characteristics more accurately, and to be less biased in their coverage (Beissinger 2002; Berman 2021; Clarke 2021). Such catalogues are therefore better suited to within-case meso-level analyses such as ours. A detailed discussion of our sources and coding methodology may be found in the Appendix of this paper.

⁶ Both countries were coded '6' by the Polity Project in 2018, a score that is at the lower end of the range associated with democracy (6–10).

⁷ This understanding of contention is drawn from McAdam et al. (2001).

4.3 Analytic method

Protest event catalogues are rich, complex data sources that lend themselves to multiple analytic approaches. Charles Tilly and his students used event catalogues descriptively, to characterize long-term trends in contention and to map shifting relations between state and society in the form of evolving contentious repertoires (e.g., della Porta 1995; Tarrow 1989; Tilly 1986, 1995). More recent works have tended towards regression analysis, using spatial or time series modelling to identify the ecological covariates of contention (Andrews and Biggs 2006; Beissinger 2002; Robertson 2007; Trejo 2014), to study the effects of protest on public attitudes or behaviours (Ketchley and El-Rayyes 2020; Tertychnaya 2020; Tertychnaya and Lankina 2020), or to identify drivers of event-level outcomes and characteristics, such as repression (Berman 2020; Hendrix and Salehyan 2017).

In this paper we use a combination of these techniques. We begin with a set of analyses that are more akin to Tilly's descriptive event catalogues. By looking at overall protest levels, as well as shifts in revolutionary demands and tactics, we identify key trends, sequences, and inflection points in our two revolutionary cycles. This part of the paper is also inspired by Tarrow's (1996) concept of a 'protest cycle'—a sequence of stages, episodes, or phases denoting specific temporal rhythms within movements or revolutions. Our analysis seeks to periodize the various phases and stages of the revolutions in our two cases, in the hope of revealing common patterns and processes. We also map these phases in our event data to major political events during the uprisings, to understand the dynamic relationship between elite/institutional politics and popular politics.⁸ We then compare these phases, sequences, and relationships across our two cases of Lebanon and Iraq, allowing us to identify commonalities in patterns of mobilization and state response. Where these commonalities exist—and where they are in line with the theoretical intuitions above—we can tentatively conclude that we have identified a generalizable set of patterns that are specific to revolutions in democracies.

In addition to these descriptive analyses, we use regression analyses to understand the dynamics of protest and state response in our cases. Specifically, we follow other studies of state repression (e.g., Berman 2020; Hendrix and Salehyan 2017) and evaluate the event-level characteristics that predict certain levels of repression (i.e., lethal vs non-lethal) and repression by certain types of actors (e.g., state vs non-state). Again, where the findings from these analyses are similar across our two cases, we take this as suggestive evidence of a potentially generalizable relationship.

Our study is primarily a theory-building exercise, and we therefore do not set out to 'test' our arguments with strict, causally identified research designs. Further, and in line with process tracing methodology, our method allows us to exploit temporal dynamics as important sources of analytic leverage (Pierson 2004). Our approach, in this sense, builds upon a substantial tradition of temporality-conscious research in the fields of social movements and contentious politics, including Sewell's (1996) 'eventful' sociology and della Porta's (2018) centering of 'critical junctures' in the study of social movements.

⁸ In line with process tracing methodology more broadly, such mapping allows us to exploit temporal dynamics as a source of analytic leverage (Pierson 2004).

5 Cycles of protest and demands

The revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon were launched within weeks of each other. In Iraq, protesting began on 1 October 2019, precipitated by Prime Minister (PM) Abdel Madhi’s decision four days earlier to demote a popular general, Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, who had helped to defeat the Islamic State. The move was broadly interpreted as a capitulation to corrupt politicians aligned with Iranian-backed militias, who viewed al-Saadi as a threat to their interests and power. In Lebanon, protests began about three weeks later, on 17 October, in reaction to a new tax on calls made via the messaging platform WhatsApp—which activists saw as only the latest manifestation of the government’s ineptitude and corruption.

The striking synchronicity in these two uprisings did not end there. Not only did they raise a very similar set of demands—regarding corruption, sectarianism, state violence, and lack of government accountability—but over the coming weeks and months their mobilization unfolded in a series of phases that bore a striking resemblance to each other. In both countries, the movements realized some impressive and rapid successes, particularly in forcing the resignation of their respective prime ministers. But following these resignations the movements splintered and lost their way, and by the end of March 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic began to take hold, they were losing momentum without having effected serious political reforms. In this section, we use our protest data to periodize these twin uprisings into four phases, which helps us to unpack their internal dynamics and the reasons for their somewhat limited success.

Table 1: Four phases of revolution mobilization

		Iraq	Lebanon
Phase 1	Revolutionary escalation	Late September until the resignation of PM Abdel Mahdi (29 November)	Mid-October until resignation of PM Hariri (29 October)
Phase 2	Dispersion	Late November to Mid-January	Late October to early January
Phase 3	Frustration and resuscitation	January (three weeks surrounding Nasiriyah deadline)	January (until appointment of new cabinet)
Phase 4	Demobilization	February and March	February and March

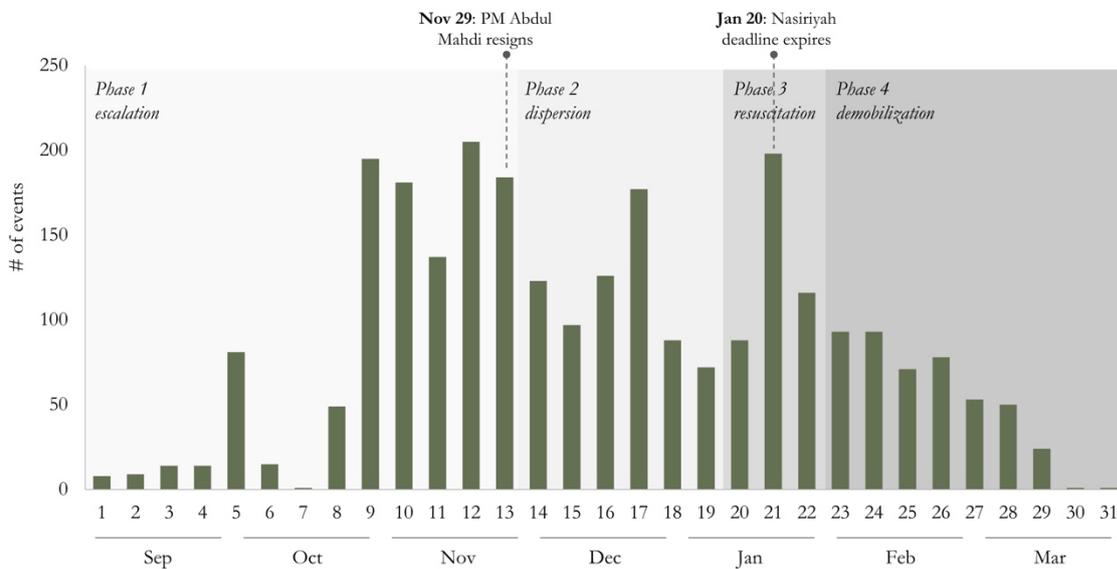
Source: authors’ own construction.

We periodize the revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon into four phases, laid out in Table 1. This periodization is also represented visually in Figure 2, which overlays the four phases with the number of weekly protests in each uprising, based on our protest data. The two graphs in the figure represent the count of protests nationally in each country beginning on 1 September 2019 (i.e., several weeks before either uprising was launched). During the first phase of these uprisings, we observe a relatively rapid escalation in protest. In Lebanon, protests shot up during the first week of the uprising (week 7), reaching 219 protests nationally, and remained elevated for the next two weeks. In Iraq, the first phase of the uprising was a bit more uneven. The first major week of protesting was week 5 in the figure, the first week of October, when there were 81 protests nationally. Protest levels then subsided in the middle of October before escalating once again in week 8 (48 protests) and week 9 (195 protests), following calls by activists to resume the revolution. Protest levels then remained elevated and sustained, at roughly 180 protests per week, through October and November.

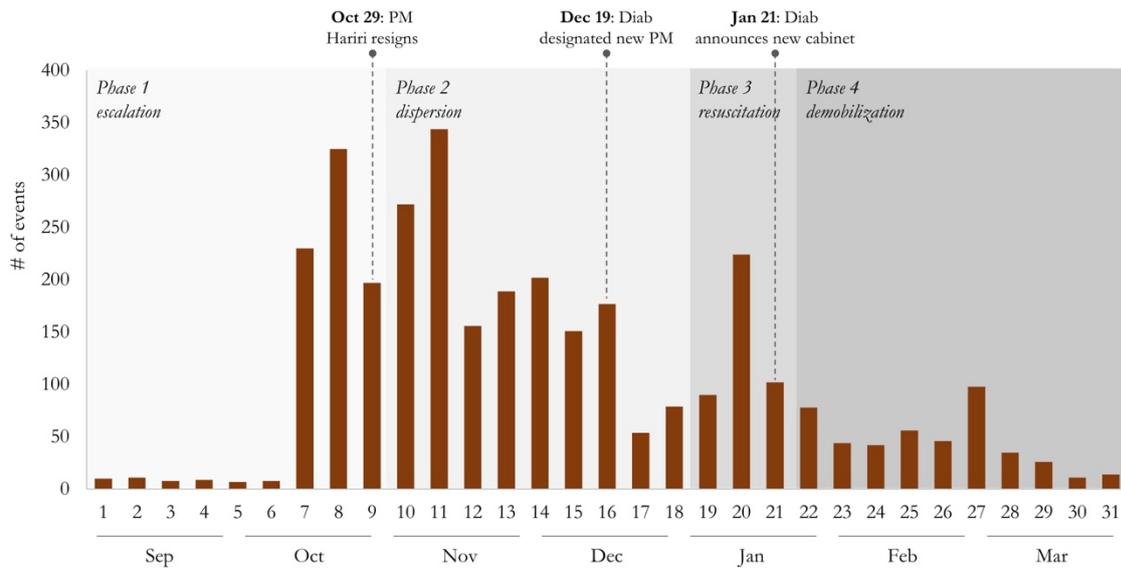
In both cases, the rapid escalation of protests created what Charles Tilly (1978) called a ‘revolutionary situation’—i.e., a situation in which two rival claims to sovereignty were simultaneously being exerted, one by protesters in the streets and squares and one by the incumbent government. It was during this period that activists embraced and adopted a discourse of revolution, calling for wholesale transformation of the political system and a restructuring of democratic institutions. Though they called for the resignation of the prime minister and other important political leaders, they insisted that this would be only the first step to a more fundamental overhaul of the regime. This rapid and intense pressure on the government yielded some immediate success. In both countries, the incumbent prime minister was forced to resign—Lebanon’s Saad Hariri stepped down on 29 October during the third week of protest and Iraq’s Adil Abdel Mahdi resigned on 20 November, after weathering five weeks of sustained protest. We demarcate the end of Phase 1 in both cases as the resignation of these two prime ministers.

Figure 2: Weekly number of protests, Iraq and Lebanon (2019–20)

2a: Iraq



2b: Lebanon



Source: authors' illustration based on own datasets.

Of course, in an autocracy the resignation of the chief executive would typically signal the triumph of the revolution, as autocratic regimes usually cannot survive the fall of the leader in whose hands power has been concentrated. But in both Iraq and Lebanon, protesters understood that though the prime minister may have been toppled, the core of the regime remained very much intact. Indeed, in many ways the prime minister appeared to have been offered up as a sacrificial lamb—a concession to protesters' demands that would allow all of the other main power-holders to retain their positions and privileges.

As a result, mobilization did not end during this second phase but instead continued, calling for further resignations and deeper reforms of the political system. But, as we discuss further in Section 5.1, without a clear figurehead against whom protesters could direct their demands, this phase of the revolution saw considerable dispersion. Though protest levels remained high, the demands of the revolutions became amorphous and nebulous, with groups of activists pushing in different directions and raising different demands. To some extent, sustaining the revolutionary momentum became a goal in itself, with activists cycling between demands in order to keep their followers rallied and mobilized.

We see the dispersion of these protests and demands in both countries. In Lebanon the main rallying cry of the revolution was the chant 'All means all!'—an effective, albeit nebulous, call for the removal of the entire political class. Another example from Lebanon can be seen in the image in Figure 3: protesters in the northern city of Tripoli hung a huge banner in Al Nour Square that read in Arabic 'We are continuing until the overthrow of the President of the Republic and the Parliament'.

Figure 3: Protest in Tripoli, Lebanon (29 October 2019)



Source: © Raafat Majzoub; reproduced with permission.

In Iraq, protesters focused at first on denouncing the repression and human rights abuses that had occurred earlier in the revolution, before switching to a variety of demands focused on various parts of the political system: dissolution of the parliament, early elections, a new constitution, rejecting various potential prime ministerial candidates, and opposing specific parties and factions. During this time, we also see Iraqis beginning to chant for ‘Total reform of the political system’ (إصلاح كامل للنظام السياسي). In both cases, we see the effects of these more dispersed and amorphous sets of demands on protest levels: there is a decline in mobilization immediately following the prime minister’s resignation in Iraq and a similar decline two weeks later in Lebanon.

We call the next phase of these revolutions the resuscitation phase. This phase represents, in both cases, a last-gasp effort by the movements to restore revolutionary momentum and achieve more transformational change. In both cases, we see this effort at resuscitation translate into a major protest spike in the middle of January. This push was motivated largely by activists’ frustration and disappointment as their revolutions appeared to stall, unable to radicalize beyond a certain point or to effect a more transformational overhaul of the regime. Protesters attempted to resuscitate the revolutionary fervour of the revolutions’ early days by homing in on the inability or unwillingness of the political class to come up with acceptable replacements for the ousted prime minister and the government.

In Iraq, the elites continually failed to put forward a suitable candidate to replace Abdel Mahdi, who had stayed on as a caretaker prime minister. As a result, protesters in the Iraqi city of Nasiriyah called for a deadline of 20 January, by which point they expected a new prime minister and government to be selected that would meet the demands of the revolution. When this ‘Nasiriyah

deadline' passed without any government action, protesters around the country poured back into the streets (there were 198 events during that week). In contrast to Iraq, Lebanon saw a replacement prime minister take office at the end of December. But this figure, Hassan Diab, a former minister of education, was seen as no different than the person he had replaced and representative of precisely the kind of cronyism and corruption that the revolution stood against. Moreover, Diab proved unable to assemble a new government. Frustrated by this inaction, Lebanese protesters launched a major wave of mobilization in the third week of January, calling for the prime minister to appoint an independent government that would meet the demands of the revolution. Both of these final efforts at mobilization had some effect: in Lebanon, Diab did appoint a new government in the week following the protest spike, and in Iraq a new prime ministerial candidate was announced on 1 February. But these changes were widely seen as a meaningless reorganization of the same old political system and were met with outcry by the protest movements.

The disappointments following this third resuscitation phase set the context for the final stage of the twin revolutions: what we call the demobilization phase. Here we see a gradual decline in levels of protest, as activists grew discouraged and the movements lost momentum. In Lebanon, despite major opposition to the new cabinet announced by Diab, the movement was unable to offer any viable alternatives or to block the new cabinet from taking office. A similar process took place in Iraq. Though Iraqis rejected the new prime ministerial candidate announced on 1 February, a former minister of communications called Mohammed Tawfik Allawi, they could not agree on a reasonable alternative. Faced with a fresh round of repression in early February, protest momentum began to decline. Then, in March, whatever mobilizational energy was left in these movements was rapidly snuffed out by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which both made it difficult to generate turnout and also provided government forces with the necessary cover to forcefully clear public spaces.

5.1 Demand cycling across the four phases

In the analysis above, we periodize the two revolutions in Iraq and Lebanon into four phases, based broadly around major political events and shifts in the volume of protests occurring during a given week. Another way to map these four phases is to study changes in the distribution of demands during the revolutions. We have already described in our narrative above some of the ways in which protester demands evolved across the different phases. To make these changes clearer, in Figure 4 we use demand variables that we coded in our protest datasets to show the distribution of demand types in a given week. Though we included quite granular demand categories in our dataset, here, for simplicity, we group demands into four categories: (1) demands for the fall of the government or the regime (i.e., demands calling for the government's or prime minister's resignation, or calling for the fall of the entire 'system'); (2) unspecified support for the revolution (i.e., events where no clear demand was reported but where protesters were clearly supporting the revolution); (3) other political demands (i.e., demands about politics but not directly calling for fall of the regime/government, such as denunciations of particular political figures or parties, calls for a new constitution, calls for early elections, etc.); and (4) non-political demands (i.e., events making demands in relation to labour, human rights, infrastructure, education, health, or economic issues).

Figure 4 reveals even more clearly how the nature of mobilization shifted across the four phases. In Phase 1, protesters' demands coalesced around a major focus: the ousting of the government, and in particular the prime minister. In both revolutions, we see that a majority of events during Phase 1 called for the fall of the government or the regime. This represents precisely the kind of lowest-common-denominator goal that scholars of revolutions argue is important for binding together a negative coalition—and that usually emerges when there is widespread societal antipathy

toward an incumbent dictator. And indeed, in both cases we see that common agreement over this goal of ousting the government was able to knit together a relatively heterogeneous group of individuals and social groups.

But what happened to these revolutions' demands once their lowest-common-denominator goal was reached? The figures reveal widespread dispersion of protest demands during the second phase of both revolutions. Calls for the fall of the government/regime nearly disappeared, and were replaced by a relatively even proportion of events airing nebulous support for the revolutions, raising other political demands, or making explicitly non-political demands. The focused and coherent movements that steered mobilization in Phase 1 broke down into a number of uncoordinated campaigns focused on particular labour and socioeconomic issues; calls for justice over prior repression of protesters; denunciations of particular parties, leaders, or institutional bodies; or simply sustaining the revolution itself. The latter class of events is particularly interesting: here we see activists organizing events with no specific goal or claim, with the sole aim of maintaining the revolution's momentum. Here, protest leaders often struggled to come up with slogans and demands that would continue to excite an increasingly exhausted and demoralized set of followers. In Lebanon, a co-ordination committee was created in Beirut to prepare for each weekend's protests. Our qualitative data from attending some of these preparatory meetings suggest that demand-making and -framing became a tedious endeavour, unlike in the early days when it was clear what the revolution was trying to achieve. These organizational meetings became a space of growing tension between activists, who could not agree on priorities or demands that would unify the movement and motivate protesters.

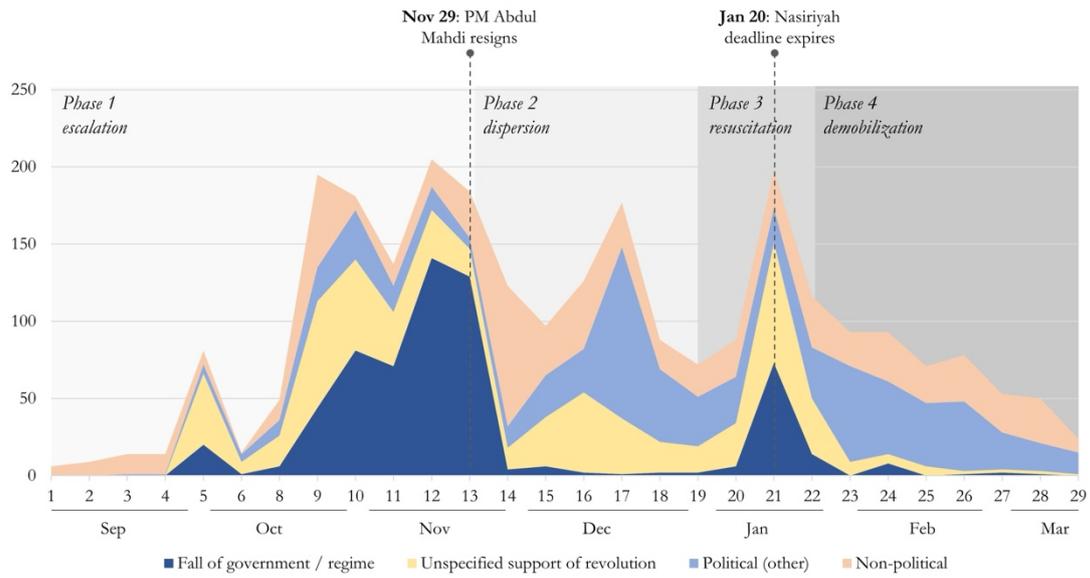
This phase therefore speaks to the struggles that activists faced to come up with clear political alternatives or coherent visions for change. It also points to the weakness of the organizational structures behind these movements—suggesting that the increased space offered to activists in flawed democracies does not automatically translate into increased organizational capacity. Rather, during this period of protest dispersion, many new and decentralized grassroots organizations emerged from within the protests, i.e., co-ordination committees or small groups of activists adopting the names of their localities, which tended to air more-specific sets of claims and grievances.

During Phase 3 of the revolutions we see a brief return of the lowest-common-denominator goal of regime change that united revolutionaries during Phase 1. Here, as explained above, protesters rallied in one last effort to force a change in government that would meet the demands of the revolution. During this period, we see many events airing the main demand of the 2011 Arab Spring revolutions—“The people want the fall of the regime”. Or we see events calling specifically for the resignation of the newly appointed prime minister (in Lebanon) or the caretaker government (in Iraq), and demanding the establishment of a new government in line with the revolution.

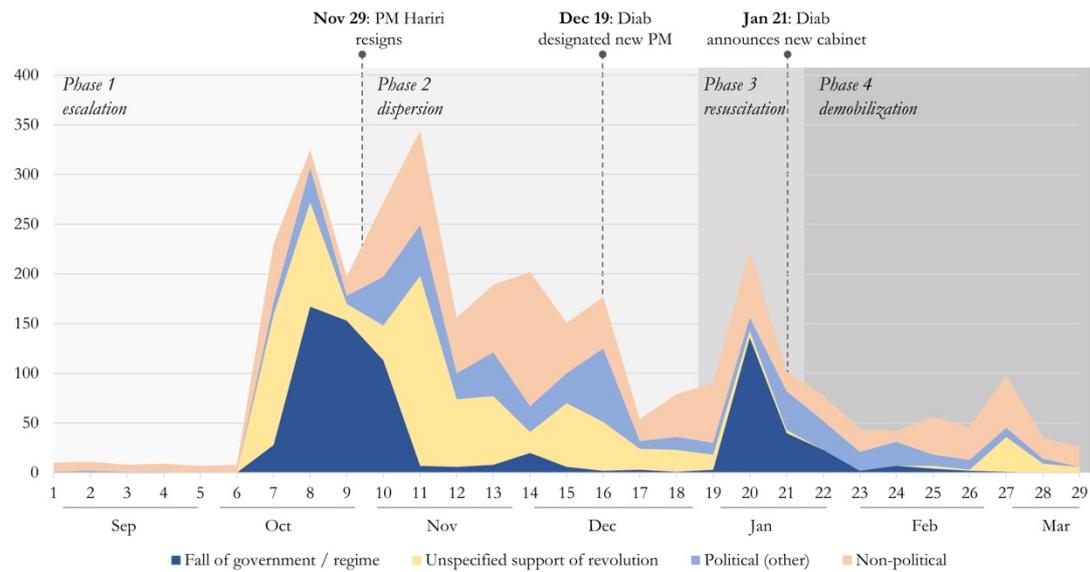
Finally, during the demobilization of protest in Phase 4 we see once again a dispersion of protest demands. Labour and social issues became increasingly prominent, as did political demands over more-specific grievances or calls for limited reforms. Nebulous protests in support of the revolution mostly faded away during this period, as protesters began to accept that the revolutions could not be sustained. Eventually, as noted above, the COVID-19 pandemic set in, sapping the revolutions of whatever momentum they had left.

Figure 4: Weekly number of protests by demand, Iraq and Lebanon (2019–20)

4a: Iraq



4b: Lebanon



Source: authors' illustration based on own datasets.

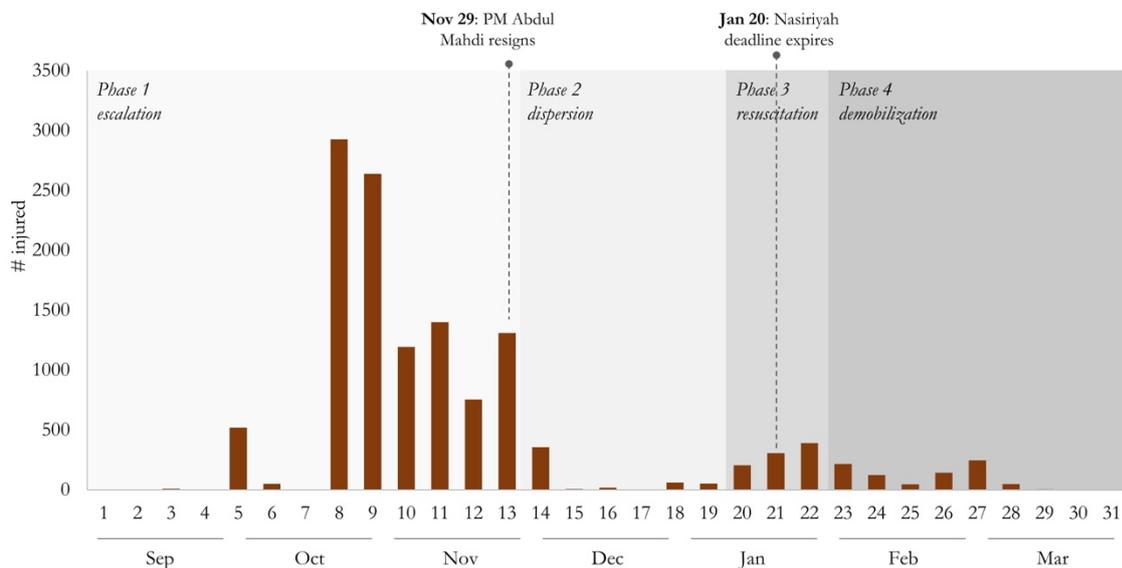
6 Patterns of state response

6.1 Repression levels and repressive actors

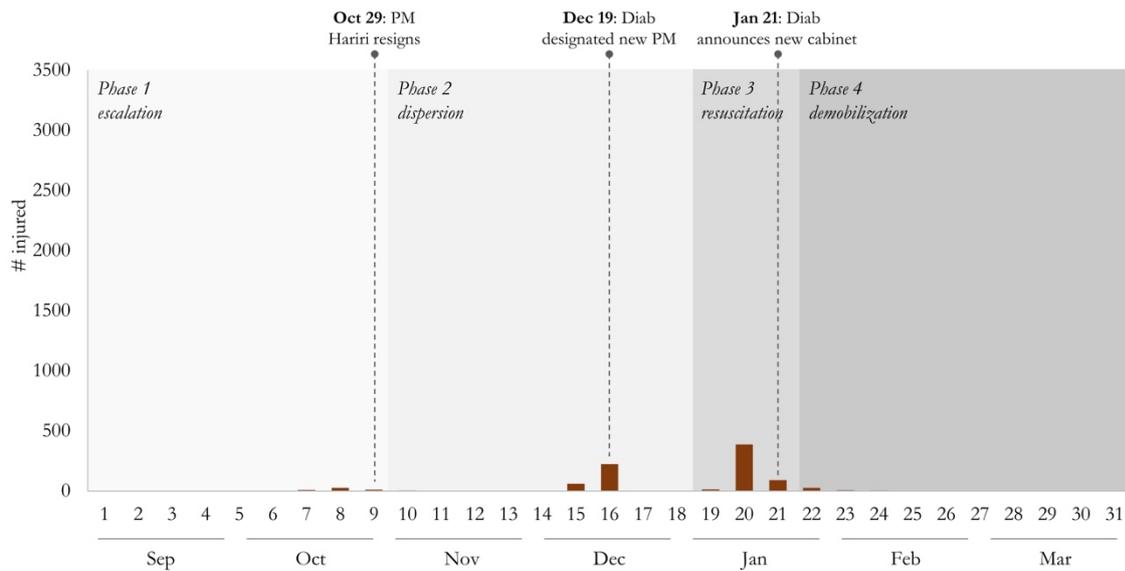
In the previous section we analysed patterns of mobilization and claims-making in Lebanon and Iraq, showing how the loss of a lowest-common-denominator goal following the two prime ministers' resignations caused fragmentation and dispersion within the protest movements. Without a clear government figurehead to oppose, the revolutions struggled to maintain their negative coalitions and their revolutionary momentum. In this section we turn to the question of state response, and specifically how the two regimes wielded violence in order to quash the revolutionary movements. We find that in both countries (but especially in Iraq) protesters encountered severe repression and violence—raising profound questions about the idea that democratic regimes generally do not use violence against their challengers. Moreover, we find in both countries a clear pattern of non-state violence by actors tied to various political factions within the regime—in Lebanon the Shi'a political parties Hezbollah and Amal, and in Iraq the Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Moreover, we find that though these actors were used less frequently than state actors such as the police and the military, their deployment was associated with more-severe repression, indicated by protesters sustaining severe injury or protester death. They also tended to be deployed against protesters exhibiting more-violent characteristics or those occupying public areas. These findings suggest that elites in these regimes may have essentially been outsourcing their 'dirty work' to these non-state repressive actors, using them to put down particularly threatening protests or when they wanted to avoid blame for especially egregious repression.

Figure 5: Weekly number of injuries, Iraq and Lebanon (2019–20)

5a: Iraq



5b: Lebanon



Source: authors' illustration based on own datasets.

Figure 5 lays out repression trends in Iraq and Lebanon, showing the weekly count of injuries captured in the event datasets. For reference, it includes the same events noted in the earlier figures. As the figure makes clear, the level of state violence was considerably higher in Iraq than in Lebanon. In Iraq, our data capture more than 13,000 injuries and nearly 800 deaths, whereas in Lebanon we document closer to 1,200 injuries and three deaths. We also see temporal differences in when repression occurred. In Iraq, repression was highest earlier in the revolution, during Phase 1, especially in the final two weeks of October and through November. The deadliest day was 25 October, when protests resumed after the brief hiatus in mid-October. Approximately 100 protesters were killed and more than 2,500 injured, the culmination of multiple repressive attacks against protesters in Baghdad, Kerbala, Basra, Muthanna, Maysan, Thiqr, and Diwaniya. Later in October and in November, high rates of violence can be traced to a number of particularly brutal crackdowns against single events, usually sit-ins or roadblocks. These crackdowns were later named after the locations where they occurred: the Kerbala Massacre on 28 October (18 killed, around 800 injured; Amnesty International 2020a); the Nasiriyah Massacre on 25 November (42 killed, around 500 injured; Amnesty International 2019); the Najaf Massacre on 28 November (49 killed, around 300 injured). Thus we see that in Iraq, repression occurred most heavily in Phase 1, as political authorities and state actors sought to quash the revolution's initial momentum.

In Lebanon, the most violent periods occurred in Phases 2 and 3 of the revolution, particularly during week 16 in mid-December and weeks 20 and 21 in mid-January. The violence in December occurred as state forces sought to contain the popular response to Diab's designation as prime minister and his efforts to begin forming a new government. The nights of 14 and 15 December were particularly violent in Beirut. There were major clashes around Parliament Square between protesters using Molotov cocktails, riot police using tear gas and rubber bullets, and militiamen wielding batons and knives. Hundreds of people were injured in these clashes, at least 60 of whom required urgent hospitalization (Human Rights Watch 2019). These events triggered a week of increased violence around the country, with supporters of Amal and Hezbollah attacking protesters, destroying tents in squares, and burning cars and other property. The second major period of repression in Lebanon occurred a month later, in mid-January, in response to the spike in protesting during the resuscitation phase of the revolution. This repression peaked on 18 and 19 January, when more than 409 people were injured in Beirut alone. The violence continued until

21 January, when Diab announced the formation of the new cabinet. In this sense, whereas in Iraq the most intense repression was deployed during Phase 1 in an effort to halt the revolution’s initial momentum, in Lebanon repression was used later as political authorities sought to wrestle back control of the country, bring an end to the revolutionary situation, and ‘restabilize’ the political system (Koopmans 2004: 37).

While the timing of repression thus differed somewhat between these two cases, the data do reveal a striking similarity in the nature of repression: considerable use of non-state and semi-state actors, alongside state actors such as the police and the military. Table 2 lays out the proportion of repressed events that involved each of three actors: police, military, and non-state agents (including militias, political parties, and unaffiliated thugs).⁹ We see that in both cases, the police were the main repressive actor, involved in 85 per cent of repressive events in Iraq and 56 per cent in Lebanon. In Lebanon we also see that the military was a major repressive actor, whereas the Iraqi army was rarely used for repression. But we also see that for a non-trivial number of repression events, non-state agents were involved: 17 per cent in Iraq and 8 per cent in Lebanon.¹⁰

Table 2: Share of repressed events involving different repressive actors (2019–20)

	Iraq	Lebanon
Police	90%	56%
Military	5%	43%
Militia, party, or thugs (non-state)	16%	9%

Source: authors’ construction based on own datasets.

In Iraq, protesters were attacked by an array of thugs, militias, and other non-state actors. However, the main agents of this non-state repression were a handful of Shi’a militias and parties organized under the umbrella of Hashd al-Shaabi/PMF, a pseudo-state alliance of paramilitary organizations backed by Iran that was instrumental in defeating the Islamic State in various cities of northern Iraq.¹¹ These militias included the Badr Organization, Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kataib Hezbollah. For protesters, these groups represented precisely what was wrong with the country’s regime. They operated with virtual impunity and little oversight or control from the central government, and they were bound up in the corrupt networks of privilege and power that had made Iraq’s government utterly dysfunctional and unaccountable. Indeed, most of these militias were directly linked to one of Iraq’s main parliamentary blocs, Al-Fatah, which came in second in the 2018 elections and officially constituted the main opposition. Protesters often raised these organizations’ names in their chants and surrounded, mobbed, or attacked their headquarters or buildings. For example, on 25 October, the deadliest day of the uprising, protesters surrounded the headquarters of the Asaeb Ahl al-Haq militia in Maysan, and the subsequent clashes resulted in 14 deaths. On the same day in Thiqr province, 24 protesters were killed after they attacked the headquarters of the Badr Organization. We also see anecdotal evidence—which we confirm below through statistical analyses—that these militias tended to be behind some of the most egregious

⁹ Here, the denominator is the total number of events in which some level of repression occurred. This includes events with the full range of repressive action—from those in which security forces were present all the way through to those where protesters were killed.

¹⁰ Proportions do not add to 100% because multiple repressive actors were often involved in repressing the same event.

¹¹ Later in the revolution, protesters were also attacked by thugs aligned with the movement headed by Shi’a cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Sadr had initially backed the revolution, and members of his movement had participated in the protests. But in January he withdrew his support, at which point his followers (who were known as the ‘Blue Hats’ and had initially come together to protect the sit-ins) began attacking protesters and attempting to clear the squares (Abu Zeed 2020).

acts of violence during the revolution (also Fantappie 2019; Sirri 2019). For example, all three of the massacres mentioned above were perpetuated by a combination of police forces and non-state militias, and the reporting from these events reveals that it was the militias who were responsible for much of the killing.

In Lebanon, the main non-state repressive actors were thugs and militias affiliated with the country's various sectarian parties, particularly the Shi'a parties Amal and Hezbollah.¹² As in Iraq, these non-state actors included political wings with representation in parliament along with well-armed militias. For example, the Amal movement is headed by the speaker of parliament, Nabih Berri, who has been in power since 1992. And Hezbollah not only retains a sizeable parliamentary bloc but has also built a powerful militia that has made it one of the most influential political actors in Lebanon. As in Iraq, both of these actors felt particularly threatened by the revolution, which called for the abolition of a political system that had allowed them to grow rich and powerful. They deployed their militias, as well as plain-clothes thugs, to attack protests and sit-ins, particularly in Beirut and the Shi'a-dominated regions of the south and the Beqaa. Their attacks were also marked by a clear attempt at sectarianizing the revolution. For example, in Beirut, Baalback, Nabatieh, and Tyre these militiamen violently attacked protest squares, chanting 'Shi'a, Shi'a' and hailing their leaders Hassan Nasrallah and Nabih Berri. They were also particularly aggressive in attacking protesters who mentioned their leaders by name in anti-regime chants. Some of the most violent episodes of the uprising were the days when these non-state actors attacked protesters.

6.2 Modelling repression

To gain further insight into patterns of anti-protester violence associated with different repressive actors, this section presents a series of regression models designed to analyse a two-step process leading to severe repression. First, we examine which protests were most likely to be repressed by three different repressive agents: police, military, and non-state actors, including militias, thugs, and political parties. Though certain event-level factors may certainly render protests more prone to repression overall, we also believe that event-level factors may determine which repressive actor(s) are more likely to appear. Second, within the set of protests involving at least one repressive actor, we examine the likelihood that each of these actors was associated with severe repression—i.e., where injuries or deaths were reported.

Tables 3 and 4 present logistic regressions examining the presence of these three repressive actors among the full sample of protest events. The first model in each table uses a composite dependent variable, measuring whether any repressive actor was noted at an event. The second, third, and fourth models examine the presence of police, military, and non-state repressive actors, respectively. These models include a series of important event-level covariates, including the primary event tactic, a categorical variable comprising 'demonstration' (the reference category), 'mass attack or mob', 'occupation/sit-in', 'roadblock or blockage', and 'other' (a residual category comprising some rarely used tactics). We include a categorical variable capturing protest demands, which uses the same four categories as in Figure 4: 'non-political' (the reference category), 'fall of the regime', 'unspecified revolution support', and 'politics (other)'. We also include a binary measure capturing the size of the event—i.e., whether the event was noted as having more than 100 participants. And we include a binary measure noting whether the event took place in the capital city, i.e., Baghdad or Beirut.

¹² Though these two parties were the main non-state repressive agents, other political parties also deployed thugs to repress protesters. For example, in the Aley-Chouf area, thugs affiliated with the Druze Progressive Socialist Party attacked protesters and burned their tents.

Immediately, we notice certain event-level factors associated with higher levels of repression across the board. In Iraq, for example, protests larger than 100 participants and those occurring in Baghdad are more likely to attract repression in general. (In Lebanon, ‘large’ protests appear associated only with military repression, while protests in Beirut are positively associated with police and non-state repression but negatively associated with military repression.) However, we also notice distinctions in the types of events likely to attract certain repressive actors. In Iraq, the most violent or unruly of protests—in the category ‘mass attack or mob’—are significantly more likely to be repressed by militias, parties, or other non-state actors. In both cases, occupations/sit-ins are most likely to be repressed by non-state actors (although in Lebanon, occupations and sit-ins are more likely to attract any repressive agent). This finding helps to validate our descriptive inference that non-state or semi-state actors are often called upon to do the ‘dirtiest’ repressive work against revolutions in democracies.

Table 3: Determinants of police, military, and non-state repressive actor presence at protest events in Iraq—binomial logistic regressions

	Dependent variable			
	Any repressive actor present (1)	Police present (2)	Military present (3)	Militia or party present (4)
Tactic: march	-1.082*** (0.218)	-1.357*** (0.250)	-0.172 (0.634)	-0.047 (0.374)
Tactic: mass attack or mob	0.837** (0.389)	0.411 (0.451)	-14.223 (1,713.612)	1.497*** (0.573)
Tactic: occupation/sit-in	0.080 (0.296)	-0.089 (0.314)	0.015 (1.046)	1.314*** (0.438)
Tactic: other	-1.258*** (0.352)	-1.329*** (0.369)	-15.254 (1,006.306)	-0.281 (0.740)
Tactic: roadblock or blockade	-0.373*** (0.135)	-0.355** (0.139)	-1.917* (1.041)	-0.126 (0.343)
Larger than 100	0.593*** (0.116)	0.553*** (0.121)	0.994** (0.410)	1.060*** (0.236)
Demand: politics (other)	0.736*** (0.166)	0.495*** (0.177)	0.253 (0.920)	1.211*** (0.353)
Demand: fall of regime	1.228*** (0.168)	1.285*** (0.173)	1.690** (0.788)	0.639 (0.391)
Demand: unspecified revolution support	1.384*** (0.162)	1.395*** (0.167)	1.747** (0.778)	0.515 (0.397)
Capital city	1.171*** (0.118)	1.177*** (0.121)	1.231*** (0.406)	0.577** (0.255)
Constant	-2.445*** (0.141)	-2.515*** (0.146)	-6.250*** (0.750)	-4.630*** (0.339)
Observations	2,638	2,638	2,638	2,638
Log likelihood	-1,214.611	-1,138.429	-124.616	-352.984
Akaike information criterion.	2,451.222	2,298.858	271.232	727.968

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.

Source: authors’ construction based on own datasets.

Table 4: Determinants of police, military, and non-state repressive actor presence at protest events in Lebanon—binomial logistic regressions

	Dependent variable			
	Any repressive actor present (1)	Police present (2)	Military present (3)	Militia or party present (4)
Tactic: march	-0.512*** (0.198)	-1.246*** (0.318)	0.239 (0.260)	-0.917 (0.633)
Tactic: mass attack or mob	1.041*** (0.383)	0.688 (0.453)	1.203** (0.488)	0.656 (1.075)
Tactic: occupation/sit-in	0.343*** (0.129)	0.312** (0.153)	0.510*** (0.197)	0.744** (0.321)
Tactic: other	-1.579*** (0.431)	-1.793*** (0.598)	-0.913 (0.604)	-0.850 (1.042)
Tactic: roadblock or blockade	-0.787*** (0.130)	-0.910*** (0.164)	-0.007 (0.189)	-2.619*** (0.520)
Larger than 100	0.216 (0.166)	-0.195 (0.220)	0.584*** (0.219)	0.446 (0.369)
Demand: politics (other)	0.390*** (0.138)	0.103 (0.179)	0.608*** (0.189)	2.202*** (0.584)
Demand: fall of regime	0.994*** (0.133)	1.051*** (0.161)	0.472** (0.196)	3.225*** (0.557)
Demand: unspecified revolution support	0.379** (0.149)	-0.060 (0.202)	0.390* (0.206)	2.871*** (0.605)
Capital city	0.253** (0.111)	0.800*** (0.128)	-0.754*** (0.202)	0.952*** (0.298)
Constant	-1.632*** (0.116)	-2.230*** (0.142)	-2.799*** (0.179)	-6.141*** (0.565)
Observations	3,279	3,279	3,279	3,279
Log likelihood	-1,512.602	-1,026.905	-910.132	-218.237
Akaike information criterion	3,047.205	2,075.810	1,842.264	458.475

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.

Source: authors' construction based on own datasets.

Tables 5 and 6 present analyses of the severity of repression undertaken by different repressive actors. Limiting the sample to the set of events at which at least one repressive actor was present, we model a binary dependent variable capturing whether any significant injuries or deaths occurred. We use the same set of covariates as in the previous models: event tactics, demands, size, and geography. Building on the prior models, we specify three regressions, including indicators of police presence, military presence, and non-state repressive actor presence.

Our findings indicate divergence in the likelihood of severe injuries or death associated with different repressive agents. In both cases, police are the repressive agent least likely to engage in severe repression. Also in both cases, non-state repressive actors are most strongly and significantly associated with the occurrence of deaths or injuries. (In the case of Iraq, the logit coefficient for 'military present' is higher than the coefficient for 'militia or party present'. Yet due to the small number of military repression observations, the former is less significant at $p < 0.05$, while the latter is highly significant at $p < 0.01$.) These relationships are also represented in the predicted probabilities in Figure 6.

We also observe some consistent covariate effects in the case of Iraq, where severe repression appears to vary by primary tactic (low in the case of marches, high in the case of mobs and occupation/sit-ins), by demand type (high in cases of protest calling for the downfall of the regime), and by size (positive and highly significant in the case of protests larger than 100 participants). In Lebanon, we also observe a positive (though less significant, at $p < 0.1$) effect of protests calling for the downfall of the regime, and as well as a strong positive association of severe repression with protests in the capital city.

Table 5: Determinants of protester deaths or severe injury in Iraq—binomial logistic regressions

	Dependent variable		
	Death or injury		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Police present	-0.352 (0.325)		
Military present		1.268** (0.548)	
Militia or party present			0.958*** (0.287)
Tactic: march	-1.979*** (0.541)	-1.977*** (0.530)	-2.138*** (0.550)
Tactic: mass attack or mob	1.319* (0.706)	1.393** (0.702)	1.269* (0.717)
Tactic: occupation/sit-in	1.026* (0.605)	1.033* (0.605)	0.855 (0.618)
Tactic: other	-16.929 (698.661)	-16.862 (697.874)	-17.072 (690.054)
Tactic: roadblock or blockade	-0.497** (0.252)	-0.466* (0.253)	-0.501* (0.256)
Larger than 100	1.238*** (0.209)	1.218*** (0.210)	1.177*** (0.211)
Demand: politics (other)	0.468 (0.337)	0.529 (0.333)	0.407 (0.340)
Demand: fall of regime	0.806** (0.335)	0.743** (0.335)	0.835** (0.339)
Demand: unspecified revolution support	0.460 (0.318)	0.419 (0.319)	0.500 (0.323)
Capital city	0.232 (0.203)	0.195 (0.203)	0.263 (0.204)
Constant	-0.565 (0.413)	-0.901*** (0.292)	-1.008*** (0.299)
Observations	561	561	561
Log likelihood	-341.497	-338.961	-336.171
Akaike information criterion	706.994	701.921	696.342

Note: * $p < 0.1$ **, $p < 0.05$ ***, $p < 0.01$.

Source: authors' construction based on own datasets.

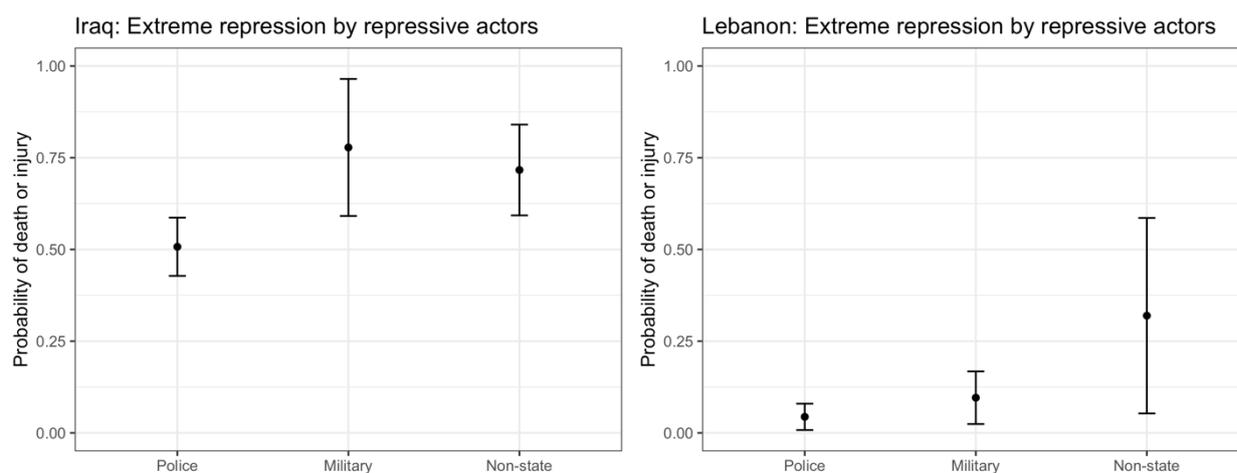
Table 6: Determinants of protester death or injuries in Lebanon—binomial logistic regressions

	Dependent variable		
	Death or injury		
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Police present	-0.708** (0.305)		
Military present		1.246*** (0.317)	
Militia or party present			1.668*** (0.380)
Tactic: march	0.052 (0.609)	-0.098 (0.616)	0.331 (0.611)
Tactic: mass attack or mob	-0.312 (1.090)	-0.376 (1.098)	-0.133 (1.101)
Tactic: occupation/sit-in	0.314 (0.373)	0.173 (0.380)	0.141 (0.386)
Tactic: other	0.631 (1.137)	0.498 (1.140)	0.519 (1.212)
Tactic: roadblock or blockade	-0.074 (0.376)	-0.333 (0.386)	0.306 (0.397)
Larger than 100	0.364 (0.392)	0.321 (0.396)	0.416 (0.401)
Demand: politics (other)	0.180 (0.438)	0.054 (0.440)	-0.091 (0.457)
Demand: fall of regime	0.676* (0.378)	0.682* (0.380)	0.206 (0.401)
Demand: unspecified revolution support	-0.090 (0.489)	-0.089 (0.489)	-0.411 (0.513)
Capital city	0.987*** (0.310)	1.157*** (0.319)	0.649** (0.300)
Constant	-2.573*** (0.404)	-3.465*** (0.415)	-2.930*** (0.383)
Observations	629	629	629
Log likelihood	-185.566	-180.109	-179.378
Akaike information criterion	395.132	384.218	382.755

Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.

Source: authors' construction based on own datasets.

Figure 6: Predicted probabilities of extreme repression associated with different repressive actors in Iraq and Lebanon



Note: estimates are based on regressions in Tables 5 and 6.

Source: authors' illustration based on results presented Tables 5 and 6.

7 Conclusion

This paper has sought to illuminate a phenomenon that, in much existing scholarship, is thought to be rare, if not non-existent: revolution in democracy. While historically it may be true that revolutions have rarely sought to topple democratic regimes, the past decade has witnessed a host of uprisings that suggest this relationship may be changing. Democratic regimes in many regions of the world have proven to be deeply flawed; though they hold regular elections, citizens have rightly come to believe that these elections do not afford them a real choice regarding who will represent them in government. These disappointments have become so acute that they have spurred people to take to the streets and call for revolution. And yet, as this paper has shown, these revolutionary movements in broken democracies have characteristics that set them apart from their peers in consolidated autocracies. The absence of a single autocratic leader who embodies the regime makes it difficult to construct and sustain negative revolutionary coalitions, and to define what success looks like. Moreover, brutal acts of repression may be undertaken by the state, but they also may be mounted by non-state or pseudo-state actors with deep interests to protect. These actors may even be deployed strategically to put down particularly threatening challenges or to execute especially ruthless repressive campaigns, allowing elites to deflect outrage and avoid blame attribution.

One of the main takeaways from these arguments is that revolutions against democracies may, paradoxically, have a harder time achieving their goals than those that seek to topple an autocrat. This claim, however, requires further careful empirical inquiry, including potentially through comparison of similar unarmed uprisings in different regime contexts or through cross-national analysis. This study has attempted a preliminary theoretical and empirical investigation of revolutions in democracies, in an effort to define some of the main characteristics of these uprisings. But future research is clearly needed on the phenomenon, not only because the existing body of research is so limited but also because the trend of the last decade is only likely to continue. Indeed, as long as democracies around the world continue to fall short in ruling on behalf of their citizens (rather than corrupt elites), there is every reason to believe that these citizens will continue to pour into the streets demanding that the promise of *real* democracy be realized.

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Appendix: Revolutions in democracies, 2010 to 2020

The below list includes all revolutionary uprisings in countries coded as democratic in at least one of two datasets: The VDem Regimes of the World (RoW; electoral democracy or liberal democracies) set (Varieties of Democracy 2023) and the Polity Project (+6 to +10) set (Centre for Systemic Peace 2021). Revolutionary and pseudo-revolutionary uprisings are sourced from Beissinger (2022) and the NAVCO (Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes) 3.0 dataset (Harvard Dataverse 2023). Secessionist movements and guerrilla rebellions are excluded.

Name of uprising	Location	Region	Start year	End year	Outcome	Polity score (t-1)	VDem RoW category (t-1)
#EndSARS uprising	Nigeria	Sub-Saharan Africa	2020	2020	Failed	n/a	Electoral democracy
2019 Chilean protests	Chile	Latin America	2019	2020	Failed	10	Electoral democracy
Montenegrin #Resist protests	Montenegro	Latin America	2019	2019	Failed	9	Electoral autocracy
2019 Albanian protests	Albania	Eastern Europe	2019	2019	Failed	9	Electoral democracy
Bolivian uprising	Bolivia	Latin America	2019	2019	Succeeded	7	Electoral democracy
2019 Colombian protests	Colombia	Latin America	2019	2020	Failed	7	Electoral democracy
Lebanese Thawra	Lebanon	Middle East	2019	2020	Failed	6	Electoral autocracy
Tishreen uprising	Iraq	Middle East	2019	2020	Failed	6	Electoral autocracy
#OneofFivemillion protests	Serbia	Eastern Europe	2018	2019	Failed	8	Electoral autocracy
2018 Nicaraguan protests	Nicaragua	Latin America	2018	2018	Failed	6	Electoral autocracy
White Revolution	Romania	Eastern Europe	2017	2017	Failed	9	Electoral democracy
2017–19 protests in Honduras	Honduras	Latin America	2017	2019	Failed	7	Electoral autocracy
2016 Macedonian Colourful Revolution	N. Macedonia	Eastern Europe	2016	2016	Failed	9	Electoral autocracy
Moldovan Maidan	Moldova	Eastern Europe	2015	2016	Failed	9	Electoral democracy
#ResignNow uprising	Guatemala	Latin America	2015	2015	Succeeded	8	Electoral democracy
Honduran Indignados	Honduras	Latin America	2015	2015	Failed	7	Electoral autocracy
2014 Bosnian Spring	Bosnia-Herzegovina	Eastern Europe	2014	2014	Failed	n/a	Electoral democracy

Gezi Park protests	Turkey	Middle East	2013	2013	Failed	9	Electoral democracy
Euromaidan uprising	Ukraine	Eastern Europe	2013	2014	Succeeded	6	Electoral autocracy
2011–12 protests in Maldives	Maldives	South Asia	2011	2012	Succeeded	n/a	Electoral democracy

Source: authors' construction based on Beissinger (2022), Harvard Dataverse (2023), and Varieties of Democracy (2023).