

# A comparative analysis of the french and the egyptian revolutions



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Former United States president, Franklin Roosevelt famously stated that ‘*remember, always remember, that all of us, and you and I especially, are descended from immigrants and revolutionists.*’ This statement was meant to urge American citizens to be alive to their revolutionary roots. To this end, it is apparent that a revolution is not an entirely new phenomenon. There exist numerous notable instances in medieval texts, both about actual events and mythology or fictional renditions such as the legends of King Arthur. Arguably, King Arthur was a revolutionary leader whose success marked the advent of departure from initial custom and tradition.

Further, revolution is arguably humanity’s most prevalent preoccupation, only rivaled by conflict and war, then later agriculture. Revolutions witnessed in more recent years have reignited an interest in the phenomenon.

Increasingly, scholars and commentators on the subject have weighed in, drawing parallels between recent instances of revolution and textbook pacesetting revolutions of days gone by. Of particular interest is the relatively recent uprising witnessed in the north of Africa and the Middle East, colloquially dubbed the *Arab spring*. This series of revolutionary uprisings were instrumental to the decline of dictatorship in this region, with some of the most globally acclaimed dictatorships, notably Libya under Muammar Gadhafi, coming to a screeching halt. This effect was also felt in the North African nation of Egypt, where years of sustained dictatorship under President Hosni Mubarak culminated in a successful ousting by popular demand. The actual series of events undertaken by the Egyptian revolutionaries at the infamous Tahrir Square have offered fodder for academic comparison between this and the classic French Revolution of

1789. Of particular interest is the preferred revolutionary path opted for in each separate incident, with a focus on its potential for results and overall appropriateness in its time. It is evident from a comparative analysis of either revolution that the Egyptian uprising of 2011 favored an empirically ineffective approach to the concept of revolution and change.

At the time of its occurrence in 1789, the French revolution marked a tumultuous event in world history, and whose effect is evident in the present day. The revolution is lauded for its resultant ideals, with significant bias in favor of equality and ideas of similar moral standing. Further, the French revolution presented the masses with an unprecedented opportunity to reconsider social order as we know it, with due regard for extraneous factors of significant bearing over said order. The historical basis for the French revolution is still up for debate, with various scholars and commentators on the subject offering insightful opinions of the possible advent of the French revolution. The third president of the United States, Thomas Jefferson, famously explained that the French were merely awoken by the American revolution which brought them to the realization of an impending decline in society in the wake of a discriminatory social order. Initially, this desire for a new order was premised on discontent with the established hierarchical order, otherwise known as estates. These were to wit: the clergy, the nobility, and the commoners. Further, a commercially illiterate monarch had led the kingdom of France to fiscal turmoil and opted for punitive tax demands to cater to the fiscal deficit, prompting protests across the kingdom of France. Initially, the protests were seeming bouts of apparent anger from clearly unorganized groups spread out across the kingdom. However, this

soon morphed to an organized movement, under the guidance of exemplary thinkers and social theorists, and assumed a proactive undertone. The revolutionaries then elected a symbol of reverence towards the French monarch, The Bastilles Fortress, and descended on the establishment wreaking havoc. The subsequent beheading of the king in 1793 marked the commencement of a new order, alien to the monarch and similarly imposed renditions of societal structure. Soon afterward, the French people authored and adopted the *Declaration of Rights of Man and the Citizen*, which placed the much-needed emphasis on the equality of all men. However, this order was not to last as the appointed leadership soon assumed a dictatorial stance, ordering the mass violation of the human rights of the French people. Eventually, the revolution came to a hasty end in 1799, when army general Napoleon Bonaparte captured the reins of power and declared himself emperor.

It is important to note that the recent revolution in Egypt bears an uncanny resemblance to the French revolution. This resemblance is multifaceted, ranging from seemingly superficial elements evident in its causes to the core strategic motivations in its subsistence to the actual decline of the achievements attained through the revolution. An exemplary rendition of the events surrounding the Egyptian revolution of 2011 was embodied in the documentary film, *The Square*. The film highlights the advent of the Egyptian revolution, as it sprouted from a miniscule thought into a full-blown instant of mass action. Increasingly, the Egyptian masses had complained of punitive tax directives and similar attempts by the state to maximize its revenue at the expense of its people (Childress). The people were also

incensed by the heightened cases of police brutality and similar instances of gratuitous oppression by the state. Therefore, the Egyptian masses established a defined school of thought, keen on discouraging the ideals fostered by President Mubarak and the ensuing social inequality. It is also noteworthy that at the peak of the rebellious attitude in Egypt, the protesting masses were an accurate representation of a cross-section of Egyptian society, including a vast majority of individuals alienated by the state, their social and economic background notwithstanding. The Egyptian masses proceeded to storm the Tahrir square, a perceived seat of social order in Cairo, where such activity would be ordinarily unlawful. This is a striking similarity to the French revolution, and various commentators on the subject have been keen to note the metaphoric similarity between the French and Egyptian revolution of 2011. The heightened aggressiveness of the masses, coupled with an apparent inability by national security, forces to regain a grip around the chaos culminated in the ousting of President Mubarak who stepped down less than a month after the initial protests. In further adherence to the French model, the Egyptians established a governing council tasked with running the affairs of the country for the six months preceding a democratically held national election. However, this period of calm and certainty was short-lived, largely due to the misgivings of the newly elected leader from the popular *Muslim Brotherhood*. The new president Mohammed Morsi assumed a Napoleonic approach to leadership, favoring muscle over reason and was ultimately deposed in 2013, during the subsistence of the events as depicted in *The Square*. In this way, the Egyptian revolution bore a striking similarity to the French revolution of 1789.

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A comparative analysis of the French and Egyptian revolutions is revealing of a pattern rife with unsavory elements of great potential detriment to any given society. To this end, it is my considered opinion that the revolutionary path opted for by the Egyptians was arguably doomed to fail from the very start. This opinion is largely informed by the sequence of events as depicted in the documentary film, *The Square*, and the musings of Irish statesman, Edmund Burke amongst other exemplary works on revolution. Edmund Burke was a versatile and commendable legislator in his time and an advocate for social equality and fairness. He was instrumental as a European supporter of the American Revolution and audibly urged the colonies to assert their place in society. However, Burke favored a bureaucratic approach to the problem, citing the inherently unsustainable nature of revolutions, at the undeserved expense of revolutionaries. Following Burke's school of thought, the Egyptian revolution was bound to exhibit a failing trajectory akin to its French counterpart. This is mainly embodied in the gratuitous violence against the state, with unjustifiable veneration of political leaders. Further, revolutionaries in Egypt exhibited an inclination towards extremist ideas as a possible solution to their societal problems. However, this approach is misguided; as such extremism is notorious for its double-edged effect. Ideally, the period following the successful ousting of undesired political elements through extremist initiatives is characterized by the victimization of the masses with the same extremist ideas. This was evident in the Egyptian case where the democratically elected President Morsi assumed an authoritarian stance soon after ascending to the office (Childress). A rather predictable reaction to the ensuing political euphoria, in further adherence to Burke's rendition.

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In conclusion, it is also noteworthy that there exist differing academic opinions on this approach to revolution. Of particular interest is the school of thought favored by erstwhile revolutionary Thomas Paine. Paine's life was an eventful existence, a vast majority of which was spent in an insatiable drive for revolutionary justice. Paine strongly favored the notion that the power to choose the leadership of a nation lies with the freemen of the nation. Therefore, Paine thought it unjust that other states could exercise lawful control over declared colonies, to the exclusion of their supposed subjects. The author offered considerable academic support for the revolutionary path to change, as embodied in the French revolution of 1789. Paine argued that the masses reserved the right and power to depose oppressive governments through violent means. In later writings, it became increasingly evident that Paine suggested a relatively wide berth of undesirable elements of the *status quo* that may prompt such revolution. For instance, he established the concept of a *guaranteed minimum earning* as a possible solution to the economic strife endured by the third estate. However, it is a worthy concession that Paine's approach to revolution features an adrenal motivation for abrupt change. It is important to note that socially stable nations are the product of gradual evolution, and can only be permanently changed for the better through the effective deployment of considered long-term plans. As was inadvertent by the actions of the authors of the Egyptian revolution, evident from the documentary film *The Square*, revolutionary ideas with an unwarranted emphasis on violence and destruction of societal institutions, not only undermines the sanctity of the law but is also morally misguided as was evinced.

Works cited

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