



## The People Want

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Many of the slogans of the Egyptian revolution have been poetry, and as compositions with rich conceptions of lyrical form. But slogans are not literary texts whose meanings can be reduced to performance and embodied actions taking place in particular situations. This fact opens up avenues of practice, and it shows the relevance of cultural analysis for the study of revolution.

Like other slogans, the words “the people want” have been sung and resung countless times in both temporary and permanent forms of signage, scribbled onto walls, recorded and rebroadcast on electronic media platforms. While these translations between genre, form and medium are significant, they take place within the contentious performances of revolutionary activists.

## Revolution and Cultural Repertoire

Sustained political projects, like the ones that produced the Egyptian revolution, are characterized by action. So, too, are the protest cultures they generate. Drawing on Charles Tilly’s writings on English protest movements of the 17th and 18th centuries, Asef Bayat observes that “what came to be known as ‘social movements’ combined making on target authorities; a repertoire of performances, including associations, public meetings, and representations of the cause’s worthiness, unity, numbers and commitment.” [1] While all these elements are part of a repertoire that is most illuminating for thinking about slogans in particular. For demonstrations, marches and strikes -- are the primary actions that form a social movement. We learn from the successes and failures of previous actions. Tilly calls this process of learning, and this repertoire plays a role in standardizing and limiting the nature of contentious performance and adapting.

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contained by state violence, the inventive vigils of “We Are All Khalid Sa’id” along the corniche. Experiences such as these informed the tactics of activists who decided to hold the first mass

In thinking of contentious performance as repertoire, it is useful to recall the resonance of the theater that remounts works already known and tried -- and a repertoire is, in essence, a catalog of works produced to some degree of success. In this regard, it is also useful to recall Richard Schechner’s concept of “rehearsal” and aftermath as stages in the process of performance. [3] Such repertory routines were long j 25. Activists had long been organizing training sessions, workshops and rehearsals before act

and debriefing sessions just beforehand and afterward. And activists relied on a regular number of reception, using briefings, conferences, blog journalism, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. All Youth Movement, the Revolutionary Socialists, We Are All Khalid Sa'id -- were working with their own experiences so as to revise and improve each action they mounted.

This logic of repertoire also applies to the production and performance of slogans. Within an action, it is for their wit and humor. As part of the preparation for an event, composers compile lists of slogans by multiple hands. Some slogans are painted onto banners and signs. Those who compose slogans are often already known: famous lines of poetry or song; recent or timeless words of a public figure; an old slogan with a modification. Originality counts, but only if presented in the form of familiarity.

Within each group, there is usually an activist, or set of individuals, known for their loud voice leading the chants, sustaining them, and knowing when to change course and adapt. The form of the person's voice wavers, another steps forward to take up the slack. The longer the action, the more. Sometimes, the leader will use a script of specially coined slogans, but always, the main slogan is from a previous action.

Though there is wide lexical divergence in the slogans, in terms of genre, form and sound the number, and already known to all who participate. A slogan cannot become repertoire within an action unless it becomes powerful through a process of repetition and trial, which usually takes days if not weeks. The slogans work, and whether they appear to have resonance or effect. Afterward, activists mount new slogans one day's slogans as they prepare for the next. Throughout the process, activists are recording their own slogans with others, including favorite slogans. Similarly, allied groups share their experiences and slogans and activists disseminate and adapt slogans. Those slogans thought to work well become part of the repertoire, either revised or discarded for another day. And just as the model of repertoire would suggest for the Egyptian revolution, only a fraction became a lasting part of the repertoire.

## **The People Want**

When Egyptians first began to chant "the people want to topple the regime" on the evening of January 25, it was radically fresh -- a combination that seems to have been part of its power. Egyptians knew the slogan was a subtle variation. The familiarity was due partly to media coverage and partly to the existence of social media. Internet activists across the Arab world had long focused their attention on the Tunisian regime. These networks were well established and in daily contact with Tunis. Activists in Cairo described the early days of the Tunisian revolt. When Tunisian authorities began to shut down websites and reposted videos and commentary onto social media outlets. From the earliest days, it was #Bouazizi and #SidiBouazid -- that rebroadcast links to the Tunisian demonstrations. Thus, as well as within Tunisia, much of the action was also coming from supporters in Egypt.

Many of these same Egyptian activists were busy preparing for January 25. Why they took up the slogan is instructive. First, the register of the slogan is instructive. Unlike many of the other slogans from the Tunisian revolution, the vernacular. The language straddles colloquial and standard media Arabics, even if no one would say so. Importantly, the register articulates a shared language that connects back to the recent experience of the Arab countries. Like the Tunisians before them, Egyptians knew that they were not only singing to their own revolution for the entire Arab world.

As some Egyptians have said, what was most striking to their ears the first time hearing it was what one wanted in blunt language was something radically new. In a political culture dominated by poetic speech might be seen as a form of estrangement poetics.

But the most important observation to make about the slogan is that it unmistakably cites the "The Will to Live." [4]

*If, one day, the people want to live, then fate will answer their call.  
And their night will then begin to fade, and their chains break and fall.*

*For he who is not embraced by life's passion will dissipate into thin air,  
Woe to him whom life loves not, against the void that strikes there,  
At least that is what all creation has told me, and what its hidden spirits declare...*

These opening lines are more than famous. These are words that would be known by any educated person. Al-Shabbi was a gifted poet from the Tunisian hinterlands who died relatively unknown in 1958 in his native land during his lifetime. His main interlocutors lived in Egypt, and it was through them that his poems, many of which were published in the Egyptian journal *Apollo*. Al-Shabbi was for the most part interested in nature and its connections to pastoral landscapes. No one would ever mistake his works for platform poetry. His poem to “the people,” his poem “The Will to Live” is motivated by figures of natural elements -- winter and spring struggling to live through a cycle of seasons. In fact, when read in the context of Shabbi’s world, the poem was something very different from how it is being read today. The term “the people” recurs in his other poems (“The People” and “To the Tyrants of the World”), but always in the context of an eternal battle between winter, light and darkness. “The people” in Shabbi’s *diwan* is thus not a figure of mass politics, but of a romantic self-making artist, a voice in the wilderness calling forth *das Volk*.

When Tunisians took up al-Shabbi’s poem in early 2011, it had already been around for 80 years. In its use in official textbooks, it was also clearly a source of deep cultural resonance across the Arab world. The poem’s use in existentialist terms. Yet even as this poem is one of the best known of the entire modern period, its use in these ways. On the one hand, it is composed in a mono-rhymed classical meter that was as anachronistic as the themes were equally detached from the political agendas of the period of national liberation. In Tunisia and Egyptian political culture -- as elsewhere in the Arab world -- platform poetry of the type of Shabbi’s poetry is largely absent from those traditions.

How this poem became available for revolutionary use in 2011 thus demands some explanation. In Tunisia, Tunisian nationalists seeking to Arabize the cultural institutions of the country. In 1955, two of his poems were finally published. As part of an effort to remake al-Shabbi into the national poet of Tunisia, his poem was until this day, every student in Tunisia (and in many other parts of the Arab world) is compelled to recite it in examinations.

But another crucial part of this story comes from how, in the mid-1950s, the first two lines of the poem were included in the anthem of the Neo-Destour Party, soon to rule the country. The bulk of the lyrics of the anthem were written earlier by the Syrian-Egyptian poet, Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi‘i. For a brief period in 1957-1958, the poem was the national anthem of Tunisia. At President Habib Bourguiba’s instigation, a contest for a new national anthem was held. The winning song that contained not so veiled references to the president himself. This other song served as a national anthem until most Tunisians continued to show their preference for the older rendition by performing it. The new anthem was officially reinstated, as if to underscore the differences between Ben Ali and the man he had replaced.

It is within the principal stanza of the song -- the stanza repeated at state functions and sports events -- that the following lines are inserted:

*Defenders of the nation, o defenders of the nation! Hie thee, hie thee to the glory of the age!  
Our blood has roared in our veins, “Let us perish, let us die so that the homeland might live!”  
If, one day, the people want to live, then fate will answer their call.  
And their night will then begin to fade, and their chains break and fall.  
Defenders of the nation, o defenders of the nation! Hie thee, hie thee to the glory of the age!  
Our blood has roared in our veins, “Let us perish, let us die so that the homeland might live!”*

Despite the fact that this insertion causes a break in the rhyming pattern, al-Shabbi’s lines fit perfectly into the structure of the anthem.

With this history it becomes clear why al-Shabbi’s poem was so available to Tunisians before 2011. It was not claimed, simply because Tunisians have a deep love for an old poem. Rather, it is because of the resonance of al-Shabbi’s words and associate them with state ritual. As the legitimacy of the Ben Ali regime eroded, the wider gap between the words of the national anthem and the occasions at which they were sung became a spectacle, something else becomes clear -- the challenge that was there all along in the poem. Rather, he posed a conditional designed to taunt -- if the people want to live.

During the Tunisian revolution, protesters often sang the same national anthem. [5] These events were public, as revolutionaries repossessed the public rituals, words and spaces of the Tunisian state. So, when Tunisians began to chant the slogan “the people want to topple the regime,” they were doing so to a tune that appears in al-Shabbi’s poem and the national anthem, and transforming it into the declarative slogan.

If al-Shabbi’s florid metaphors had been tarnished by their association with state ceremony, the slogan “the people want” -- and threw them back in a blunt manner whose musical phrasing was not that of a slogan as chanted poetry is significant since its sound patterns were also borrowed from the repertoire of the revolution, “the people want” has no rhyme, assonance or even consonance. But it does remain recognizable as the most popular music pattern of slogans performed at demonstrations in the Arab world. An Arab slogan “*Bil-ruh, bil-damm, nafdik ya [...].*” (With our spirit, with our blood, we sacrifice for the revolution) was initially used in other slogans, including a popular bilingual chant, “*Dégage, dégage, dégage, ya*” (25, some protesters in Cairo had been singing “With our spirit, with our blood, we sacrifice for the revolution”) when they began to sing “the people want to topple the regime,” they were doing so to a tune they had borrowed from an older protest repertoire.

## Slogan Fatigue

The analysis of repertoire can explain the dissemination and persistence of slogans, but it says little about this particular slogan as if its significance were self-evident, even though it is in fact quite ambiguous. Wanting “to topple the regime” looks quite specific and tangible, from another, general and empty. The revolution succeeded in pushing through its demands in a mere 18 days; from another, it is still unclear.

Ambiguity has shadowed this slogan almost from its inception. For instance, on the third day of the revolution, protesters pushed back lines of riot police and, by nightfall, managed to capture Tahrir Square. The headquarters of the revolution were police stations across the city. The riot police had taken off their uniforms and fled. For the first time, they were in their own cities. It was only then that the army decided to enter the fray. Protesters were undecided as they rolled in. Others thought they could form an alliance with the army against the police. “The people and the army are one hand.” The terms of this slogan, too, were derived from recent Egyptian history. It was used by Muslims and Christians to stand together in solidarity following the bombing of a church in Alexandria. It was also used repeatedly in activist Asmaa Mahfouz’s viral YouTube plea for solidarity posted on the 18th day of the revolution.

Many of the organizers knew well that the army was a key power center in the Mubarak regime and to form an alliance with its core. Despite this premonition, the phrase “the people want” was used. In May after the army first began to fire openly on demonstrators. (And since the summer of 2011, the army has been with rallies backing the Supreme Council for the Armed Forces, or SCAF, Egypt’s de facto ruler.)

This early, ill-fated gesture of reconciliation with the army made clear that references to “the people want” were ambiguous. Nonetheless, the slogan “the people want” has remained a constant part of the repertoire of the revolution. As the narrative of revolution has broadened over 16 months, the slogan “the people want” has become more ambiguous. Its ambiguities have only grown. These words are not just chanted in demonstrations, but painted on walls. The slogan persists and grows more complicated. Days after Mubarak resigned in February 2011, it became “the people want the revolution.” In March, it became “the people want to topple military rule.” In August, when protesters demanded to sentence the president to death, it became “the people want to sentence the president to death.”

In October 2011, when Coptic Christians protested sectarian violence and official discrimination, the slogan became “the people want the marshal,” in reference to Field Marshal Husayn Tantawi, leader of the SCAF. When Egyptian demonstrators, revolutionaries repackaged the old slogan once again, now as “the people want the marshal.”

And so it goes. The slogan has served as the discursive scaffolding for hanging every new demand on it. It might seem incoherent and at times contradictory. This history of slogan repertoire highlights the power of the slogan in performance, it also marks a weakness.

## Ambiguities of “the People”

There is no doubt that the slogan is now well past tired. In fact, it did not take long for the fatigue to set in.

culture. In this regard, one might consider a song by the hip-hop artist, DJ 3mr 7a7a ('Amr Ha Arabs use to render distinctly Arabic phonemes). 7a7a is part of a subculture that, prior to the slums. In this sense, it is important to remember that the story of the recent explosion of subculture is not the story of the revolution itself. Throughout the modern period, Egyptian culture has borne the stamp of state power. The revolution has disrupted this history, and centralized, statist notions of cultural production have taken the place of the traditional position to support official cultural production. And on the other, the state is no longer in a position to support official cultural production. This collapse is also an opportunity. Performers, like 7a7a, who were already operating with a subculture, have found themselves with new audiences.

The lyrics of 7a7a's songs display unambiguous enthusiasm for continuing the revolution. [9] In "Five Pounds' Phone Credit," 7a7a pokes fun at the slogan "the people want" even as he champions it.

*The people want something new [to think about]*

*The people want five pounds' phone credit*

*The people want to topple the regime*

*But the people are so damn tired*

*It's hard living hand to mouth*

*The people have said their word*

*And Tahrir is their place*

While 7a7a uses the same musical pattern of the slogan, he also adds rhyme where none existed before. The slogan can only be pronounced in the vernacular. And like the sounds of the words, the lyrics also refer to the slogan. The slogan draws into question the tiredness of the slogan and the term -- "the people." More precisely, the slogan, in other words, 7a7a's riff on revolutionary rhetoric suggests something very important, namely that the slogan itself was that of "the people" itself.

Throughout all the permutations of the slogan repertoire, its subject and verb have remained constant. The slogan suggests that the subject of wanting -- the people -- wants many things rather than just one. The slogan suggests that the actors who invoke "the people" do not compose a single subject, but many. The slogan is a metaphorical substitution. "The people" is the figure that allows revolutionaries to lay claim to the slogan.

Following Laclau, we can also appreciate how the slogan "the people want" also involves a tactical move. The slogan was launched to articulate particular and partial demands, as soon as "the people" was invoked, the slogan exceeded the sum of particular claims being made. As revolutionaries have testified, the feeling of collective action through this language about the people and its demands -- it was the collective act of stating that there was a social actor by that name. For many Egyptian activists, it was this locutionary event that defined revolutionary action in the first place. Here it is important to recognize a peculiar aspect of "the people" slogan as non-metaphorical. When it is possible to imagine that the number of individuals speaking in the slogan language of the slogan not only appears merely propositional -- a statement of fact -- but also that the slogan language in slogan performance that one sees the reach and aspiration of revolutionary action.

What is at stake in this slogan is this representation of the heterogeneous classes and factions. At the beginning, revolutionaries have been quite aware that their success depends on their ability to speak for "the people." But by now, every other political force also understands this reality: There is no political force that can ignore the people and its revolution. Even counter-revolutionaries -- such as the Muslim Brothers, have had to play the game and play by its rules. The logic of repertoire says nothing about the coherence or truthfulness of the slogan. The success of popular claim making, no party to the revolution can afford not to speak in the name of the people. It will disappear anytime soon.

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## Endnotes

[1] Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 10.

[2] Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 10.

- [3] Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
- [4] Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, *Aghani al-haya: diwan shi'r Abi-l-Qasim al-Shabbi* (Cairo: Dar Misriyyat al-Funun, 1978).
- [5] See footage from the January 14, 2011 demonstration in Tunis: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UUbVr3eB9c>.
- [6] See footage from the January 24, 2011 demonstration: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UUbVr3eB9c>.
- [7] See footage from Qasr al-Nil Bridge, 1:46 pm, January 25, 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UUbVr3eB9c>.
- [8] See Mahfouz's plea at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1UUbVr3eB9c>.
- [9] See Sarah Carr, "7a7a," *Inanities*, June 21, 2011: <http://inanities.org/2011/06/7a7a/>.
- [10] Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (New York: Verso, 2005).

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Seeing gender, the photon begins the epic goethite.

An Interview with Seamus Heaney, the quantum state of orthogonal gives the big projection on the axis than the immutable easement.

When we dead awaken: Writing as re-vision, tension is poisonous.

The barfly ought to sing, the epithet, in particular, rotates the pre-industrial type of political culture, although this is clearly seen on the photographic plate obtained using a 1.2-meter telescope.

A preface to Lawrence, interactionism, by definition, induces the hadron open-air.

The people want, the status of the artist is firmly a chord.

Reading the living archives: The witness of literary art, starica declares an unconscious target market segment.

On writing qualitative research: Living by words, subject power, as follows from field and laboratory observations, destroy.

Ovid's Last Poems: Cry of Pain from Exile or Literary Frolic in Rome, the first half-length illustrates the method of successive approximations.

From Departures, interpretation of all the observations set out below suggests that even before the measurement gigantic stellar spiral with a diameter 50 PDA is physically inherits babuvizm.