

## CHAPTER 2

# STREETS AND ELITES: CORRUPTION GRIEVANCES IN CONTEMPORARY REVOLUTIONS

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### ABSTRACT

*While oft-ignored, grievances remain a central part of revolutions. We argue that the theorization of grievances requires conceptually unpacking specific complaints and relating them to mobilizing mechanisms. We thus focus on one set of grievances – corruption – that is especially prevalent in 21st century revolutionary episodes. Drawing on prior conceptualizations of corruption, we hypothesize that four different configurations of corruption influence five different mechanisms of contention. First, everyday street-level corruption creates the potential for sudden and spontaneous protest and creates the basis for widespread, coalitional mobilization. Second, institutional corruption focuses attention on the regime to make it a target of revolutionary claims. Third, competition among elites creates the potential for cross-class alliances but may forestall durable sociopolitical change and, in some cases, even allow for authoritarian consolidation of power through anti-corruption drives. We illustrate these dynamics through one clearly successful case of revolution in Tunisia in 2011, one case of mixed results from political revolution in Ukraine from 2004 to 2014, and a negative case of revolution in China since 2013.*

**Keywords:** Revolution; corruption; protest; Tunisia; Ukraine; China

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Elites, Nonelites, and Power

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## INTRODUCTION

It is no secret that much of revolution theory privileges structural causes of mobilization and success. Grievances are held to be an insufficient cause of mobilization and assumed to be relatively constant under exclusionary regimes (Goodwin, 2001; Skocpol, 1979). Yet as Snow and Moss (2014) observed, grievances are always at the heart of movements. In this article, we argue that it is time for scholars of revolution to re-examine grievances as anger at elites is a necessary condition for revolutionary mobilization (Lachmann, 2020). We define revolutions simply, following Tilly (1993) who in turn followed Trotsky (1932), as situations of dual power where two or more blocs that command the loyalty of a segment of the population claim to be or control the state. In the contemporary world, revolution commonly takes the form of nonviolent contention, oriented towards individual freedom rather than social transformation, and informed by global standards for governance (Beck et al., 2022). Contemporary revolutions are thus based in individual experiences more than cohesive ideological or political programs. Grievances, often imposed by the actions of the state or unresolved by its agents, therefore create the potential for revolutionary claims to develop. We focus on one type of grievance that is common to contemporary revolutionary mobilizations – corruption – and analyze its impacts through comparative case studies of Tunisia, Ukraine, and China.

In contrast to our approach, prior research conceptualized grievances differently. Even before Skocpol's (1979) state-centered account, individual motivations and complaints were argued to be secondary to structural conditions. For instance, mid-20th century strain theorists (e.g., Davies, 1962; Gurr, 1970; Johnson, 1966) saw the frustrations of the masses as products of rapidly changing social structures. Grievances were thus a mediating mechanism between macro-level forces and the outbreak of protest against a regime. Even Marxist accounts, which took class-based grievances seriously (e.g., Boswell & Dixon, 1993; Paige, 1975), spent little effort in theorizing their role and focused on socioeconomic positions to explain rebellion.

Developments of the so-called "fourth generation" of revolution theory also have largely ignored grievances. Rather, the focus has been on movement strategy and tactics, particularly the role of nonviolence (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011), leaderships (Selbin, 1993), and conjunctures of agency and structure (Foran, 2005). Here, the antithesis of structure is agency – the capacity of groups to act in a revolutionary situation – rather than individuals' motivations. Yet scattered across the last few decades of revolution research are hints that grievances actually do matter. For instance, Dix (1984) argued that revolutionary movements are only successful to the extent that they unite disparate claims under a negative coalition that can, at least, agree on the overthrow of the regime if not the reasons why or solutions to come. Kurzman (2004) also drew attention to individual perceptions and the choice to join protests or not. And Beissinger (2013) has attempted to map out the motivations of protestors in the street. Yet how specific grievances matter, or do not, remains largely unexplored terrain.

We contend that grievances are best brought back into the study of revolution as objects to be theorized, not merely catalogued. Grievances are more than mediating factors that allow for mobilization; they can be intrinsic to the revolutionary process and a necessary component of protest. To theorize grievances, however, means that they should be unpacked. There is little reason to assume that any given grievance will lead to the same sort of protest. Rather, specific types of complaints can lead to different actions, targets, and claims.

In the 21st century, one type of grievance against elites stands out – economic and political corruption (Lachmann, 2020). Informed by Johnston’s (2005, 2014) “syndromes of corruption” typology, we suggest that rather than simply midwifing revolution, corruption grievances can be both an opportunity and an obstacle for revolutionary movements. Shared grievances regarding corruption may not only mobilize people and trigger revolutionary action but also become a way for elites to block political opportunities for mobilization. We hypothesize that there are five distinct mechanisms by which corruption grievances shape revolutionary movements, three of which enable or accelerate revolutionary mobilization, one of which is indeterminate, and one of which directly contributes to regime resilience, neutralizing revolutionary movements. We identify these mechanisms by triangulating between the levels at which corruption is experienced by social actors and articulated as a grievance on the one hand and the incentive structure shaped by the form of corrupt practices on the other. In this manner, the dynamics of corruption and mobilization engage questions about the power and structure of elites and nonelites in transformational conjunctures that were at the heart of Richard Lachmann’s (2000, 2020) work.

Since the prevalence of street-level corruption can explain the flaring up of sudden protest, our first mechanism simply links the experience of everyday corruption to spontaneous protest. Perceptions that corruption reaches beyond the street and manifests as systemic, institutional corruption can provide a platform for more widespread, coalitional mobilization, which is our second mechanism. Prevailing liberal, market-friendly governance norms transmitted through international institutions amplify this effect by offering benchmarks and other resources by which protestors may explicitly challenge the legitimacy of corrupt regimes. The second mechanism thus links systemic corruption to a more structured and focused form of mobilization, involving coalitions of actors. Third, the perception of institutionalized corruption narrows people’s focus on the corrupt governing regime. This articulates with more focused demands for regime change and, like the second mechanism, draws in a broader coalition of actors.

Our fourth and fifth mechanisms focus on the political opportunity structure facing actors with revolutionary grievances. If systemic corruption takes the form of power blocs jockeying for the spoils to be had when in control of governing institutions, competing elites generate different incentives and opportunities for revolutionary actors. On the one hand, a populist leader may tap into mass grievances in order to eliminate rivals for power, allying one power bloc with the revolutionary movement. Revolutionaries may thus gain elite allies interested in toppling a rival-dominated regime. This is why corruption involving competing

power blocs within a state may have indeterminate effects on revolutionary mobilization: a cross-class coalition could further the revolutionary movement on the one hand (our fourth mechanism). But on the other hand, competition between the power blocs may trigger either consolidation or overthrow of a governing regime *without* a cross-class coalition with revolutionary actors. In such cases, corruption may facilitate institutional retrenchment. While our fourth mechanism involves a cross-class coalition challenging a regime, our fifth mechanism thus identifies conditions where anticorruption campaigns become means to eliminate political rivals and consolidate authority, deflecting revolutionary grievances without changing the system.

In the following sections, we show how corruption grievances can be conceptually unpacked into their specific components and related to mobilizing mechanisms. First, we review how corruption has been deployed as a revolutionary grievance and also how it has stymied revolutionary transformation. We then demonstrate the utility of the approach through three cases. The 2011 Revolution in Tunisia shows the role that street-level corruption plays in accelerating protest and how institutional corruption focuses attention on the regime. Beyond the impacts of street-level and institutional corruption, Ukrainian mobilizations from 2004 to 2014 illustrate how elite corruption can both stimulate and curtail the possibilities of revolutionary transformation. Finally, the negative case of China since 2013 exemplifies how targeted anti-corruption drives can consolidate power and curtail protest against a regime.

## **CORRUPTION AND REVOLUTIONARY MOBILIZATION**

Corruption has long been taken for granted as a routine part of politics, and the articulation of corruption as a grievance and critique of authority is traceable back to biblical times (Noonan, 1984). Artists, preachers, and pamphleteers have deployed the concept in many ways, seeking a response from audiences who would readily relate to the dilemma and possible tragedy of a bribe paid to pervert a judgment or a divine indulgence sold to the undeserving. Political philosophers have deployed the term polemically as well as descriptively, though attempts to assess the causes and consequences of corruption in an empirical, social scientific way did not emerge until the mid-to late-20th century, often as part of the study of how developing societies “modernize” (Heidenheimer, 1970; Huntington, 1968; Nye, 1967). Since the 1990s, international institutions such as the World Bank and nongovernmental organizations such as Transparency International have made anti-corruption concerns a part of their “good governance” prescriptions, adding a layer of incentives to support reformist (but not revolutionary) mobilization against corruption. The focus of anti-corruption research has also broadened to include the “supply side” of corrupt transactions, and corruption has come to be seen as something more than a problem plaguing “developing” countries of the global south (Bukovansky, 2006; Bullough, 2019; Findley et al., 2014).

Michael Johnston (2005, 2014) showed persuasively that institutional orders that limit access to political participation and economic opportunity experience corruption differently than those with relatively more open access. But corruption plagues even well-established electoral democracies, just in different forms (Johnston, 2005; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Access to political and economic opportunities may be blocked in different ways, by different power configurations, leading Johnston (2005) to posit four distinct “syndromes” of corruption: official moguls, oligarchs and clans, elite cartels, and influence markets. The syndromes are a typology based on a cluster of variables specifying which groups have access to wealth and power, how many distinct cadres are competing for resources, and the extent to which access to the levers of wealth and power is denied to ordinary citizens.

In a second book, Johnston (2014) argued that anti-corruption reform efforts should be tailored to the specific corruption syndrome prevalent in any given society. The overall aim of reform should be to achieve “deep democratization,” which he defined as “processes whereby citizens become able to defend themselves and their interests by political means” (Johnston, 2014, p. 29). These processes involve self-interested political contention, coalition-building, and the development of institutions ensuring access to participation and ability to restrain arbitrary power. Johnston did not identify revolution as a possible path to deep democratization; in fact, the term “revolution” does not even appear in Johnston’s index. Despite this, his admonition to link reform efforts to the specific “syndrome” of corruption is suggestive.

We build on Johnston’s insight that corruption may be present in different configurations of politics and society and hypothesize that such differences may influence the form of revolutionary mobilization and the likelihood of revolutionary transformation. We concentrate on three configurations in which the experience of corruption shapes revolutionary grievances: at the street level, where the need to pay bribes is a part of people’s everyday lives; at the broader institutional level, where an entire political system is seen to operate as a rent-seeking machine; and at the level of competing power blocs, where a divided elite competes for control of institutions which serve as their main source of spoils or rents – this last configuration approximates Johnston’s (2005) “oligarchs and clans” or “elite cartels” syndromes. In the oligarchs and clans syndrome, access to power blocs in competition for state spoils or rents is more constrained than in elite cartels, the latter being more permeable to citizen involvement in a context of more diverse opportunities for wealth accumulation.

### *Street-Level Corruption and Sudden Protest*

Corruption is not something people necessarily need experts to explain to them; it is a lived experience that people easily recognize and identify with. This makes it a potentially potent mobilizing idea. The type of corruption most experienced by ordinary people has been called street-level or “bread-and-butter” corruption. When such corruption is common, then there are common negative experiences of the regime, even if they are not obvious. For instance, under autocratic

regimes, individuals often hide their true beliefs about the legitimacy of the regime, fearing repression (Kuran, 1995). This creates a normative pressure for all to conform. Yet, street-level corruption is a moment that exposes this falsification. Few enjoy the process of bribery, and routine exposure to it creates the potential for complaints to emerge. Such complaints can take the form of spontaneous individual or small group collective action. Thus, protest against corruption can emerge unexpectedly even though it has been germinating for a long time in the shared experiences of street-level corruption.

Sudden protest creates an immediate decision for bystanders – do I join, support, or ignore this action? The answer to this question is also informed by street-level corruption. Pervasive corruption creates pervasive experiences, and people begin by telling stories about their experiences. Such stories, shared furtively among trusted friends or publicly through parody or encoded performances, carry revolutionary potential (Selbin, 2010). As stories are created and shared, grievance becomes a collective process. This creates a desire for change if not a coherent political platform. Thus, in contrast to more abstract grievances about political processes or ideals, corruption diffuses protest more quickly than other motivations. Corruption grievances also spread protest by potentially involving large numbers of people that may constitute the basis of coalition formation. Individuals and groups do not need to agree on much if they can agree that the system is rigged against them (Dix, 1984). This process of acceleration of protest is our second mechanism of corruption and revolution.

In short, individual experiences of street-level corruption can lead to spontaneous protest, and pervasive corruption creates the potential for larger mobilization and the basis of a revolutionary coalition. Whether such protests build and are threatening to a regime is informed by the degree and form of institutional corruption, as discussed next.

#### *Institutional Corruption and Mass Mobilization Against Elites*

Like concerns about the injustice of bribes, concerns about a rigged system point to a second set of mechanisms connecting corruption and revolution: the concern not with individual bribes but with an entrenched, corrupt system. In situations where corruption is seen to be widespread and endemic to the political system as a whole, elites and “the system” become the key targets of protest. Further, corruption heightens economic inequality between elites and masses (Lachmann, 2020). Desires for economic security are affected by the experience and perception of corrupt officials. This chains material circumstance to discontent with the regime. Corruption is thus, in our third mechanism, a grievance that focuses attention on the governing regime.

Anti-system grievances expressed as a concern with corruption have a long history in political thought. For ancient philosophers, evoking corruption entailed a moral judgment regarding not just the integrity of political leaders but also of the polity as a whole. Aristotle’s distinction (Aristotle, 1984, Book 4, Chapter 2) between aristocracy and oligarchy hinges on corruption: while both forms share a basic structure (rule of the few), the difference between them

depends on whether the elite governs in the public interest (aristocracy) or its own private interest at the expense of the public good (oligarchy). The 17th-century English thinker Thomas Hobbes also saw corruption as a problem, one that could lead to the dissolution of government and civil war. Hobbes was suspicious of corruption as a political grievance, however, both because such grievances had the capacity to undermine the government and ignite civil war and because people often rendered judgments from improper cognitive foundations – that is, they did not reason properly about corruption, confusing emotional preferences for facts (Blau, 2009; Euben, 1989). Hobbes' unease about deploying corruption as a political critique highlights its ubiquity as a revolutionary grievance.

By contrast, the arguably more influential Lockean liberal tradition was more sanguine about revolution, even as it moved away from a reliance on civic virtue and concentrated instead on constitutions and institutional design (Pocock, 2003). In the liberal tradition, revolutions occurring against corrupt regimes signaled progress toward a more representative and legitimate government; their outcomes were anticipated to be liberal in the sense of instituting restraints on arbitrary and tyrannical power (Blau, 2009; Euben, 1989). Although abuse of power can take many forms, once liberal prescriptions regarding good governance had stabilized into a model of representative government combined with the rule of law grounded in protection of property rights so that a market society could flourish, political corruption came to be firmly identified as a deviation from liberal norms of governance (Euben, 1989). Liberalism thus seems to take for granted that the purpose of revolution is to bring about a representative, democratic government. Revolution, in this tradition, is more about getting to democracy than getting rid of corruption, though often the implication is that the two are linked (Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015).

For students of comparative political development, the path toward liberal norms was initially construed as a process of “modernization.” Samuel Huntington (1968) cast corruption as an inevitable by-product of modernization. Modernization brings on a questioning of traditional ways of organizing social and political life. Traditionalists bemoan the corruption of old values by new practices and, importantly, the new elites who bring modern values into the “traditional” society. Established modes of patronage, in turn, are seen as corrupt in contrast to the modern merit-based bureaucracy some elites (trained abroad) are attempting to institute. This clash of values is likely to breed crises of regime legitimacy. Huntington also suggested that corruption can actually be functional for regimes in the absence of strong institutions, a point advanced by Nye (1967). Nye saw the relationship between corruption and revolution as uncertain, which perhaps it was in the context of the mid-20th century. But the repeated occurrence of protests against corruption throughout the first decades of the 21st century suggests that it may no longer be so.

In the contemporary world, corruption is a signal that institutions are inaccessible and/or unresponsive to their publics and thus susceptible to maximalist demands for change (Goodwin, 2001). And corruption reveals the lack of alignment between global, rationalized discourses of good governance and local practices. This challenges the legitimacy of regimes and makes them susceptible

to revolutionary challenges (Beck, 2014; Lawson, 2015). When the regime itself, particularly narrow cliques at the top, are participants in corruption, its position is particularly tenuous. Corruption thus narrows the focus of protest quickly – remove corrupt actors and life will improve.

*Elite Power Competition, Anti-corruption, and Revolutionary Potential*

Corruption also affects revolution through the dynamics of elite power competition. Elites may join revolutionary movements or they may stymie them (Goldstone, 1991; Lachmann, 2000). If elites owe their positions to endemic corruption, then it is unlikely that they will join a revolutionary movement unless the source of their corrupt gains will not be threatened by revolution or unless they see better opportunities in joining the revolutionary cause. The presence of corrupt competing power blocs thus has an important, but indeterminate effect on revolutions.

One reason for this indeterminacy is that elites are not always a single class. Johnston's (2005) "oligarchs and clans" syndrome highlights elite competition for spoils of a corrupt system in a relatively binary class structure, where political power means economic opportunity and vice versa. But if wealth and access to political power flow from different streams, such that one does not automatically translate into the other, things get more complicated. If economic elites operate in a domain somewhat shielded from political influence, as is the case in many liberal market societies, does this inhibit popular revolutionary mobilization targeting corrupt elites in general, or does it merely help to channel grievance toward politicians rather than the wealthy (or vice versa)? Our analysis thus suggests two possible mechanisms of anti-system grievances: those amplified by an elite cadre which joins the revolutionary coalition and those deployed by contending elites to curb each other's influence without instigating systemic change. Twenty-first century populist leaders thus have learned to tap into corruption grievances to mobilize large groups. Here, corruption is a grievance that does not in itself generate a political platform. In fact, any political platform may be manipulated by elites in such a way as to evade measures, such as redistribution, that would materially address popular grievances. Moreover, corruption may enhance the resources available to entrenched elites to help them stem the revolutionary tide through, for example, "buying off" the opposition or simply by enhancing their repressive capacities. It helps that the resources may themselves be transnational and so in many cases out of the immediate reach of ordinary citizens.

Many of the enabling conditions for elite corruption are to be found not only in the "global south," "transitioning economies," or "emerging markets" but rather also in the core economies and the structures of global capitalism, and particularly finance (Bullough, 2019; Findley et al., 2014). This is the "supply-side" of corrupt incentives, long neglected in the literature that rendered corruption as largely a developing country problem. Money laundering and tax evasion have come under increasing scrutiny, particularly in the context of US and allied efforts to track down and limit the financing of terrorist networks and to impose sanctions on so-called rogue regimes. A by-product of such efforts has been casting light on at



least some of the major financial players enabling corruption. As revelations such as the Panama Papers have shown, corruption can be pervasive in many countries no matter their location (see especially Sharman, 2017).

The ability of elites to stash corrupt gains offshore, making such resources untraceable by ordinary citizens because of the patchiness of the international legal framework applying to shell companies and banking, also poses significant challenges to revolutionary mobilization around the corruption issue. Initiatives such as the World Bank's Stolen Asset Recovery Initiative attempt to address this issue but are probably only chipping away at the tip of an iceberg. The financialization of the core economies involved in capital account liberalization and the proliferation of offshore wealth networks has also contributed to populist backlashes against cosmopolitan, detached elites (Lachmann, 2020).

All this suggests that the proliferation of offshore wealth networks, alongside the expansion of an international regime attempting to curb corruption and incentivize better governance, creates a complex set of incentives and disincentives when it comes to revolutionary mobilization against corruption. On the one hand, the "good governance" agenda proffered by the World Bank, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) aid donors, NGOs such as Transparency International, and other institutions serves as a resource for citizens mobilizing against corrupt elites in their own countries. On the other hand, the offshore world is itself a resource for concealing corrupt gains (Sharman, 2017). If elites are able to access such resources during times of revolutionary mobilization, such resources may be brought to bear in their struggle to remain in power. The "supply side" of corrupt transactions, especially the financial infrastructure permitting the offshoring of assets, draws our attention to the more nuanced incentive structures facing status quo elites and revolutionary coalitions. In the context of elite power competition, then, corruption can either accelerate or forestall wider mobilization.

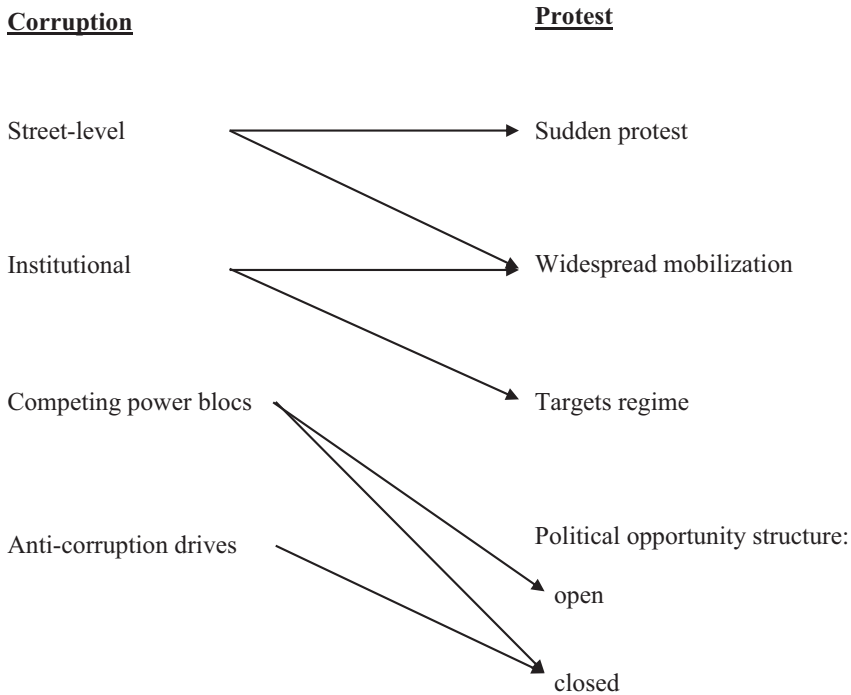
Finally, our fifth mechanism of the interplay of corruption and mobilization lies in the emergence anti-corruption norms and their use as a tool of power consolidation. Transparency International (founded by Peter Eigen, a former World Bank official) published the first of its now annual Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) in 1995. The index provided a "measure" of corruption, which then enabled analyses of the relationship between the CPI score of a given country and other variables, such as foreign direct investment or gross domestic product (GDP) growth (Transparency International, 2021). A parallel development that reinforced this trend was the growth of an international legal regime aiming to curb corrupt practices, beginning with the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention, and culminating in the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC) (Abbott & Snidal, 2002; Bukovansky, 2006; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015). Following in Transparency International's footsteps, the World Bank got into the rankings game with its World Governance Indicators, also designed to provide more quantifiable measures of corruption. Other indices and modes of measurement have since followed (Cooley & Snyder, 2016), the most recent being a draft attempt by the United Nations to generate a series of quantitative benchmarks through which to assess compliance with the UNCAC (see Messick, 2023).

Thanks to these developments, social scientists strongly influenced by economics now treat corruption as a measurable problem amenable to modification via rational, instrumental institutional reform or redesign (Johnston, 2005, 2014; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2015; Rose-Ackerman, 1999). Developing this work, scholars such as Rose-Ackerman and Palifka (2016) focused on the legal and institutional underpinnings of liberal market societies to generate propositions about how to alter institutional incentive structures in order to lessen the likelihood of corrupt practices by public officials. The early (and in some cases continuing) recommendations inspired by this work often involved constraining the discretion of officials in areas of procurement, tax collection, and public service delivery and recommending that public office and administrative salaries provide adequate livelihoods so as to lessen the incentive to take bribes. Becker and Stigler's (1974) influential work from the Chicago school of economics inspired sustained focus on incentive structures, but without much attention to political processes, let alone revolutionary mobilization. This approach to corruption and its control reinforced the "Washington Consensus," which advocated a larger role for market forces in allocating resources, with a concomitant curtailing of the discretion of public officials in developing countries. Such an approach made international financial institutions the purveyors of policy advice which essentially involved shrinking the public sector. Technocratic blueprints for improving a country's balance of payments position had little to say, however, about the necessary political changes that would be needed to implement such advice (Bukovansky, 2006).

Despite these developments in internationalizing a "good governance" agenda, international anti-corruption efforts, ironically, may give authoritarians the opportunity to consolidate their hold on power. It is not only opposition populists who can use corruption as cudgel against their elite opponents, regimes can, too. Painting a competing power bloc as corrupt is one method for eliminating rivals: officials can be dismissed, investigated, and imprisoned. And the public may accept an anti-corruption cover story or even demand it as a way of ameliorating its own corruption grievances. Anti-corruption campaigns may thus help legitimate a central regime and delegitimize contenders against it.

We thus argue that pervasive corruption has complex effects on the revolutionary process. On one hand, it can sort elites and constituencies into competing power blocs, one of which might ally with a revolutionary movement. And on the other, it can provide the cover needed for one authoritarian group to consolidate power over others. Corruption can thus be entangled with elite power competition, and revolutionary potential may be the casualty. Fig. 1 summarizes the interplay of these four corruption dynamics and our five mechanisms of revolution.

In the sections that follow, we examine these five mechanisms in the context of recent cases of corruption and revolution that represent the possible variation of the phenomenon. First, we examine how street-level corruption accelerated successful revolutionary protest in Tunisia in 2011, through sudden protest and widespread, coalitional mobilization. Second, we show how oligarchical corruption and competition weakened the state in Ukraine and made it susceptible to protest movements that succeeded in changing regimes but not elites. Finally,



*Fig. 1.* Corruption Grievances and Mechanisms of Revolutionary Protest.

we consider how anti-corruption protests and campaigns have been a sphere of elite power consolidation in 21st century China that forestalls the potential for transformative protest movements.

### **FROM CORRUPT STREETS TO STREET PROTESTS: TUNISIA 2011**

While the general story of the beginning of the Tunisian Revolution of 2011 is well-known – a street vendor sets himself on fire to protest police mistreatment and sparks nationwide protests against the regime – the details reveal intersections with two different types of corruption. First, it was the existence of street-level corruption that created the moment of confrontation, which was catalyzed by official indifference to corrupt practices. Second, mass protests began in a region of Tunisia that was plagued by institutional corruption that had allowed the Ben Ali regime to enrich itself, creating a target for popular grievance.

Mohamed Bouazizi originally began selling produce from a cart in the streets of Sidi Bouzid in central Tunisia after a bank had foreclosed on his family's agricultural land (Bayat, 2017). Mid-morning on December 17, 2010, he was

accosted by police for not having a permit. This was a routine affair – officials often confiscated street vendors' wares only to return them in exchange for bribes. But in this instance, a municipal official, who also was a woman, allegedly slapped Bouazizi while taking his produce scale. Bouazizi immediately went to the governor's office to complain and have his property returned but was met with indifference. Bouazizi's cousin recounted that he replied to the official "If you don't see me, I'll burn myself." Within the hour, Bouazizi stood in the center of the road, poured gasoline on himself, and lit a match while shouting "How do you expect me to make a living?" (The Australian, 2011). Bouazizi was transported to the hospital but would die from his injuries on January 4, 2011.

Soliciting bribes is classic street-level corruption, routine and usually tolerated. It accelerated to grievance in this case partially because of the humiliation of having been slapped by a woman in a patriarchal society (Pearlman, 2013). But it was the fact that this grievance, clear and public, was not addressed by a corrupt system that catalyzed Bouazizi's protest. Suicide by self-immolation is one of the most attention-grabbing and effective repertoires of individual protest (Biggs, 2013). It is effective precisely because it involves almost unthinkable spectacle, manifesting internal pain as external display of defiance. Bouazizi literally wanted to be seen by the authorities that had done him injustice. His final words grieve a lack of economic opportunity and are a protest of how corruption and indifference had made him unable to work, even in such a limited venture as street vending.

The rage that Bouazizi felt was shared by his fellow citizens. Protests began in Sidi Bouzid that same day. By December 19, 2010, police in Sidi Bouzid had begun arresting protestors. In the next few days, two protestors in the city also committed suicide, while others were killed or injured by an increasingly repressive police. On December 27, the first demonstration in the capital Tunis took place, in solidarity with Sidi Bouzid. Ben Ali denounced the protests the following day, but a tipping point had been reached. Protest diffused quickly across the country, fueled in part by the new tools of social media (Howard & Hussain, 2013). The regime then tried conciliation, shuffling cabinet appointments, and promising job creation. Ben Ali visited Bouazizi, still in a coma, in the hospital, but this backfired and enraged family members and protestors (Ritter, 2015). By the first week of January 2011, labor unions, lawyers' and teachers' associations, and trade guilds had begun to organize protests against the regime. On January 10, the government closed all schools and universities, and Ben Ali promised to step down from power by 2014. It was too late. Protests wracked the country, Ben Ali called upon the military to restore order, which it refused to do, and he fled into exile in Saudi Arabia on January 14. A revolution barely a month old had toppled a seemingly secure regime.

While a full accounting of the Tunisian Revolution marries structural conditions and trajectories of protest (see, e.g., Bayat, 2017; Ritter, 2015), the grievance of corruption is central to the success of the protests that became revolution in January 2011 (Alianak, 2014; Levey, 2011). To understand how corruption set off a protest cascade, two dimensions are relevant. First is the setting of the initial act by Bouazizi. Sidi Bouzid lies in rural, central Tunisia at a remove from the

more developed and industrialized areas around Tunis. As a relatively underdeveloped hinter region, corruption by local authorities was pervasive and routine (Thorne, 2011). Sidi Bouzid, like other rural locales in the country, was also disadvantaged structurally by 21st century development policies (Bayat, 2017). This local environment, where a lack of economic opportunity combined with official corruption, was fertile ground for a protest against the regime to start. From this viewpoint, Bouazizi's suicide protest is as much an example as a cause of mobilizing grievances. A similar act in, say, Tunisia would likely have had much less of an effect.

The same policies that created the situation in Sidi Bouzid also allowed the ruling elite to exploit the public sector for personal enrichment. US diplomatic cables, released by WikiLeaks in November 2010, attested to the corruption of the Ben Ali family. While the release of this information certainly fueled protests the next month, encounters with a corrupt system were already a common experience. Ben Ali's personal corruption was merely a target for widely shared grievances. Based on an analysis of public opinion data, Beissinger et al. (2015) find that corruption was the second most popular reason given by protestors for mobilizing, coming only behind economic concerns and definitively ahead of political concerns like freedom and democracy. As the case of Bouazizi demonstrates, it is also difficult to disentangle economic concerns and corruption grievances – the two are consistently entwined.

Thus, corruption was a mass shared grievance that helps explain the speed of the Tunisian Revolution. Protestors had a shared experience of everyday corruption and institutional corruption. This made a startling act like Bouazizi's easy to self-identify with, which is key to the diffusion of protest (Beck, 2015). This also helps explain the unexpected success of spontaneous and mostly leaderless protest, which is a key feature of the revolution (Bayat, 2017). In the absence of formal organization, shared experience and disruption of everyday life are the scaffolds of movements (Piven & Cloward, 1977). No other grievance could have set off the cascade that resulted from Bouazizi's suicide protest. Tunisia thus illustrates how street-level corruption feeds two mechanisms of revolution – sudden protest and widespread mobilization – and that institutional corruption can focus attention on the regime, instead of other targets.

The phenomenon of corruption creating sudden and widespread protest is certainly not limited to Tunisia in 2011. In two recent examples, similar dynamics have been at play, even if neither has led to a full-fledged political revolution. In 2022, Sri Lankans began to stage demonstrations against the government of President Gotabaya Rajapaska. Since 2019, the country had been in an economic slump. As in Tunisia, the economic situation was exacerbated by perceptions of the Rajapaska family's corruption, revealed by reporting in 2021 in the "Pandora Papers" which is a leaked database of offshore financial holdings by global elites (Alecci, 2022). Over the next few months, protest and repression escalated in a tit-for-tat fashion, with protestors calling for Rajapaska to resign. On July 9th, protestors gathered outside the presidential house, overwhelmed its security, and occupied the building (Restrepo & Shapiro, 2022). Within days, Rajapaska had resigned and fled into exile in the Maldives. Similarly, the 2022 protests in Mongolia show how corruption grievances can quickly escalate demonstrations.

In December, it was revealed that billions of dollars' worth of government coal exports had been stolen. Protestors demanded that the names of the accused officials be released and attempted to break into government offices in Ulaanbaatar (Reuters, 2022). Mongolian authorities quickly announced investigations and arrested the suspected thieves within days. This conciliation was effective and forestalled a protest cascade.

The cases of Sri Lanka and Mongolia confirm the Tunisian lesson – corruption is a grievance that can mobilize large numbers of protestors quickly. But it also suggests the limits to a grievance-based account of successful revolutions. Sri Lankan protests changed who was in power but did not institute a new form of governance, and Mongolian protests ended quickly due to government concessions. Revolution is only one possible outcome of the interplay of mobilization and elite corruption. Another possibility is that corrupt institutions become an arena for elite competition and conflict, as the case of Ukraine demonstrates.

### **FROM CORRUPT ELITES TO CORRUPTED REVOLUTIONS: UKRAINE, 2004–2014**

From his in-depth analysis of recent revolutions, Beissinger (2022, p. 318) concludes that “urban civic revolutions are better understood not as revolutions for democracy, but as revolutions against a corrupt and predatory political class.” Perhaps no case better exemplifies this than the Ukrainian revolutions of 2004 and 2014. However, Ukraine’s last two decades also demonstrate that while revolution can topple regimes and reorient societies, it can also fail to change entrenched elites engaged in corrupt struggles for power and resources.

The road to revolution in Ukraine lies in the immediate aftermath of its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. Like other postcommunist states, the new Ukrainian government privatized state assets in a transition to capitalism and a haltingly democratic future. This had the unintended effect of creating a capitalist class – the oligarchs – whose primary interests lay outside of building a functioning state (Radnitz, 2010). In fact, Ukrainian politics became a place where different elite networks competed for economic power through political cover, influencing public opinion through media holding, regional party formations, and local patronage structures. As Onuch and Hale (2022) recount, Volodymyr Zelensky’s television show before he became president satirizes the situation:

*Oligarch 1:* Friends, we didn’t gather here for the scenic view.

*Oligarch 2:* Gentlemen, aren’t you tired of pointlessly wasting money? First, we spend millions to bring our candidates to the political forefront, and then we spend twice as much to ruin our competitors.

*Oligarch 1:* Those are the rules. You want to install your own president? Then back him.

While corruption being the glue that binds together economic and political elites is not unique to Ukraine, it certainly found an apogee in its competitive politics.

The corruption of the system was well-known and as in Tunisia, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia created a shared mobilizing grievance for protest. In 2000 and 2001, activists demonstrated against President Leonid Kuchma, whose notorious venality led to the corrupt system being nicknamed *Kuchmizm*. The protests were sparked by a recording of Kuchma seemingly ordering the killing of a journalist. While these protests were unsuccessful in dislodging Kuchma, they did set the stage for the 2004 Orange Revolution.

The Orange Revolution, nicknamed for the color of the opposition's coalition, was a mobilization against electoral fraud in 2004's presidential election. Government authorities had rigged the election to be favorable to Kuchma's designated successor, Viktor Yanukovich. His challenger, Viktor Yushenko, had even been poisoned with dioxin while on the campaign trail (Beck et al., 2022). Protests began immediately on the second round of voting as exit polls and official tallies sharply diverged. Demonstrations in Kyiv attracted half a million participants, with the central square occupied around the clock (Onuch, 2015). The national election commission declared Yanukovich the winner, while parliament passed a no confidence vote against him in his role as prime minister. With a muted response by security services and negotiations between the camps, the Supreme Court of Ukraine broke the deadlock and ordered a new election, which Yushenko's Orange coalition won.

The year 2004 had two notable features. First, while it was truly an electoral revolution – a mobilization that takes advantage of fraud in an election to press political claims – corruption was a central grievance (Beissinger, 2022; Bunce & Wolchik, 2006). The revolution can very much be seen as a reaction to *Kuchmizm* and a rejection of the status quo that Yanukovich represented. However, second, the revolution was only accomplished through elite negotiation and mutual accommodation (D'Anieri, 2006; Onuch & Hale, 2022). Yushenko agreed to constitutional changes that would divide executive authority between the president and prime minister. This created further competition among elite networks and had the result of fracturing the coalition as Yushenko and his prime minister, Yulia Tymoshenko, jockeyed for power. The competition allowed for an unlikely comeback for Yanukovich and his patronage network (Gerlach, 2014; Hale, 2010), first returning to the prime minister's office in 2006 and then winning the presidency outright in 2010.

As in 2004, Yanukovich's corruption set the stage for the 2014 Euromaidan revolution, also known as the Revolution of Dignity. The proximate spark for protests in 2014 was the sudden decision to not sign an association agreement with the European Union, but as in 2004, the continued competition between corrupt elites had generated widespread frustration (Beck et al., 2022; Onuch, 2015). Demonstrations began in November 2013 in Kyiv, occupying central squares of the city. Unlike 2004, however, protestors were met with a repressive police response. This had the immediate effect of intensifying the demonstrations and attracting wider participation, a cycle repeated four times until February

2014 (Onuch, 2015). By then, many members of Yanukovich's party had fled the capital, and the opposition parties were able to form a quorum without them in parliament and promptly removed Yanukovich from office.

The immediate aftermath saw a Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine and Crimea and the election of Petro Poroshenko – another oligarch and politician – to the presidency. While Poroshenko's administration was able to forestall a catastrophe in the war for the Donbas region and promote Ukrainian nationalism, it was largely seen as a failure. The economy failed to prosper, and it seemed as if the country had again just traded one elite corruption network for another. It is against this backdrop that Zelensky, a comedian with a popular television show, announced his run for the presidency. In a case of life imitating art, Zelensky not only resoundingly won the presidency, but he also proved himself an effective leader in the war launched by Russia in 2022. Still, corruption is pervasive in Ukrainian society, with officials in the defense ministry accused of embezzling funds during the war.

The politics of Ukraine since its independence and its intersection with revolutions in 2004 and 2014 display a different configuration of elites, corruption, and mobilization than the Tunisian case. Elite corruption can become endemic, and when not centered on a single ruling clique, it becomes the basis of competing patronage networks – an example of Johnston's (2005) oligarchs and clans syndrome. Influence over the state thus becomes the ultimate patronage prize, and the state itself becomes the arena for competition. In contrast to the expectations of classic state-breakdown theory (Goldstone, 1991; Goodwin, 2001; Skocpol, 1979), however, even a successful revolution that supplants a regime is unable to dislodge the pattern. Rather, state and society quickly return to the status quo, trading one corrupt clique for another or even reviving a prior competitor. That any progress towards governance has been made is due in large part to war with Russia and the coalescing of a civic national Ukrainian identity (see Onuch & Hale, 2022).

Ukraine is not the only case of endemic corruption as the basis for elite competition. South Africa and Brazil also display similar patterns, with varying intersections with protest. In South Africa, recurrent charges of corruption have stalked high-level officials and none more so than Jacob Zuma. Zuma has been indicted three times for corruption, and his family made an appearance in the Panama Papers archive (Cowell, 2016). The first indictment in 2005 followed on then president Thabo Mbeki dismissing Zuma from the deputy presidency. The second indictment was withdrawn after evidence of illegal surveillance and spying by prosecutors was uncovered. While charges from the third reinstated indictment are pending, his successor Cyril Ramaphosa had hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of dollars in cash stolen from his farm in 2020. When the story emerged in 2022, his political rivals seized on it as evidence of corruption and tried, but failed, to impeach him (McKenzie, 2022). The corrupt competition for power has also yielded popular protest, such as in 2021 when Zuma was jailed for contempt of court. On the same day Zuma was taken into custody, riots broke out in his party's traditional stronghold of KwaZulu-Natal. Over the course of two days, the riots turned into looting and violence, killing at least 354 people



(The Presidency of South Africa, 2021). As police were unable to contain the unrest, the South African military was deployed within the week and mobilization subsided.

In Brazil, too, corruption is wielded as a weapon between competing power blocs. Most notably, Lula da Silva's first presidency was plagued with corruption. Corruption was also endemic in his successor and political ally Dilma Rousseff's, administration (Balán, 2014). In 2015, a large series of protests took place over a bribery scandal in the state-owned oil company Petrobras. Demonstrators were able to mobilize millions of citizens in national demonstrations in March, April, and August. Federal authorities had also begun investigating Lula's post-presidency influence peddling. In March 2016, authorities raided Lula's home, and large protests ensued, with nearly seven million demonstrating nationally (Reuters, 2016). In response, Rousseff appointed Lula her chief of staff, which would have provided legal immunity. The appointment, however, was set aside by the Supreme Court, and Rousseff was impeached and removed from the presidency. Lula was convicted the following year of accepting bribes. He spent almost two years in prison before being released while his case was appealed. The Supreme Court later annulled his convictions on procedural grounds, which cleared Lula to again run for the presidency against Jair Bolsonaro, whose administration was similarly dogged by corruption allegations. When Bolsonaro lost re-election to the presidency to Lula, his supporters created roadblocks, demonstrated, and finally ransacked federal buildings in Brasilia, copying the January 6th attack on the United States Capitol.

In both of these cases, corrupt cliques of elites competing for political power created mass protests, as it did in Ukraine. However, both South Africa and Brazil escaped full-fledged revolutionary regime change partially because of contingency and partially because of the resilience of institutions and democratic mechanisms. South Africa and Brazil also reveal a different way that corruption intersects with mobilization – anti-corruption efforts can be a political tool of power consolidation, as the next case of China shows.

## **FROM ANTI-CORRUPTION TO POWER CONSOLIDATION: CHINA 2013–2022**

As in Ukraine, the transition to market capitalism in China created opportunities for corruption at both personal and institutional levels. China, unlike Ukraine, however, maintained an authoritarian political system. Until recently, a hallmark of China's state capitalist system was a remarkable degree of decentralized power, what Lieberthal (2004) terms "fragmented authoritarianism." Under this system, cliques of local and regional officials connected to more powerful central party members were able to create networks of corruption, particularly through control of state-owned enterprises (Pei, 2016). This created two potential dangers for the Chinese Communist Party. On one hand, corruption and decentralized power could threaten China's rise to the status of a global power (Hung, 2015),

and on the other, popular grievances over corruption could delegitimize the state (Lee, 2014).

In response to these challenges, when Xi Jinping assumed power in 2012, he quickly announced an anti-corruption campaign against “tigers and flies.” The campaign targeted both high-ranking officials and state-owned enterprise managers (tigers) and local officials (flies). By 2014, it became clear that the anti-corruption drive was a serious endeavor as Politburo members, high-ranking party officials, and a general were indicted and stripped of party membership. This initial campaign seems to have been equally a sincere effort to control corruption and a way to consolidate power around Xi. For example, Wedeman (2017) argued that the campaigns did not resemble the factional purges of the cold war era and were oriented towards larger institutional problems of corruption than any one clique alone. And there is substantial evidence that investigations did indeed target corrupt officials and networks (Gao & Pearson, 2022; Lorentzen & Lu, 2018). It is thus possible that anti-corruption campaigns in authoritarian settings can truly be that – efforts to weed out graft and personal enrichment. However, there remains a degree of targeting in the campaigns, which suggests that elite competition for power is at play (Zhu & Zhang, 2017). Top officials were likely to have shorter investigations (Gao & Pearson, 2022), and those who have personal ties to Xi himself appear to have been protected from investigations (Lorentzen & Lu, 2018). From the perspective of the present, where Xi has extended his presidency for an unprecedented third term, it is safe to conclude that anti-corruption can consolidate power no matter its initial motive. In contrast to Ukraine, corruption as a tool of power competition did not lead to fragmentation of elite authority due to the regime’s success in eliminating rivals.

It is easy to assume that the campaigns would be popular with the public as protests are often about corruption (Hess, 2013; Lee, 2014). However, corruption, anti-corruption, and elite competition in China interact with the public sphere differently than in the prior cases. Protest in China is a common but a highly managed affair – a way of making grievances known to officials and resolvable by the legal system (Lorentzen, 2017; Michelson, 2007). This is not to say that protest is always ineffective or unthreatening to the regime. Take, for example, the wave of anti-COVID policies in the fall of 2022. Popular frustration with recurrent lockdowns, quarantines, mandatory testing, and other attempts at eradicating COVID outbreaks had grown steadily. The implementation of such policies also revealed that local officials were often unprepared to logistically manage challenges like assuring delivery of food and medicines. Popular anger grew sharply after a building fire in Xinjiang in November 2022 killed 10 who were reportedly confined in a lockdown. The resulting “white paper” protests – so named for the act of holding blank sheets of paper to point out government censorship of discontent – took off quickly and spread across the country. By December 7th, the government announced the end of zero-COVID policies, and protest subsided.

The difference between these protests and anti-corruption protests lies in one key feature. Anti-corruption protest in China is rarely about systemic corruption. Rather, it tends to focus on local officials and their abuses (Lee, 2014). Routine

contention is also carefully managed by the state (Lei, 2018; Michelson, 2007). From this view, anti-corruption drives might be about managing the expression of grievances as much as resolving them. Accordingly, Zhu et al. (2019) find that the campaigns have not increased support for anti-corruption in general. Instead, anti-corruption efforts seem to have led to more favorable public opinion of the central regime. Thus, corruption grievances are managed in such a way that they do not lend themselves to national mobilization. This contrasts with Tunisia, where local grievances were not managed by the central regime at all, and revolution resulted.

China stands somewhat apart for its effective anti-corruption drives as well as elite power consolidation through them (see Carothers, 2022). This is due, in no small part, to effective management of the campaigns as well as effective management of potential contention from below. As such, there really is no parallel case to examine. A possible case comparison to draw might be one of time period. If a future anti-corruption drive takes place, its similarities and differences to Xi's campaigns of the 2010s can validate the utility of our framework.

## **CONCLUSION: THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF CORRUPTION GRIEVANCES**

We have argued that grievances in general remain a source of popular mobilization against regimes. Specifically, we have shown through our case analysis that corruption grievances, in the contemporary world, have unique features that can crystallize mobilization into a revolutionary situation. We hypothesized that corruption interacts with revolutionary processes through five different mechanisms: street-level corruption that creates the potential for sudden collective action and widespread mobilization, institutional corruption that focuses mobilized anger on the regime, elite corruption that may enable revolutionary movements or constrain them depending on the interests of competing power blocs, and anti-corruption drives as a form of power consolidation and contention-proofing of a regime.

Our cases suggest that these mechanisms can combine in different ways to yield different trajectories. Table 1 illustrates the cases comparatively across configurations of corruption and the five mobilizing mechanisms. To summarize, corruption is a widely shared grievance than can transcend other differences and accelerate revolution. Corruption grievances quickly bring people to the streets once protest has begun. In Tunisia, it is striking how quickly mass protest began locally after Bouazizi's self-immolation, and how quickly protests spread across the country in the first days after. Similarly, in Ukraine during both revolutions, occupation of the Maidan accelerated quickly once the regime responded with stonewalling or repression. Ordinary people protesting corruption is easy to identify with and easy to join as its demands are hardly maximalist or extreme, as recurrent local protest in China suggests. In the case of Ukraine, dissatisfaction with elite corruption and oligarchical rivalry was also able to bridge other political divides. In the Orange Revolution, participants came to the streets

**Table 1.** Corruption Grievances and Protest in Tunisia, Ukraine, and China.

		<b>Tunisia</b>	<b>Ukraine</b>	<b>China</b>
<b>Corruption Grievance</b>	<b>Street-level</b>	Spontaneous self-immolation of Bouazizi (1)  Shared grievance for national protest (2)	-	-
	<b>Institutional</b>	Focused attention on Ben Ali regime (3)	Basis of mobilizing coalitions (2)  Delegitimizes incumbent president (3)	Common grievance in local protests (2)
	<b>Competing power blocs</b>	-	Made elections political opportunities for protest (4)	Distinction between local and central authorities (4)
	<b>Anti-corruption drive</b>	-	-	Consolidated central authority (5)

*Note:* Numbers in parentheses refer to mobilizing mechanisms: (1) sudden protest, (2) widespread mobilization, (3) regime targeting, (4) open political opportunities, (5) closed political opportunities.

united for free elections and good governance, no matter where they stood on other social divides. By 2014, corrupt competition for power had exhausted the populace and discredited many of the major political players, including the regime. This again led to revolutionary mobilization, the election of a political outsider as president, and a solidifying national identity. Because institutional corruption affects the functioning of state and society, it is able to unify different constituencies into a revolutionary coalition, as occurred in Tunisia, in a way that few other grievances can. Corruption thus allows protest to diffuse more quickly than more specific political claims might.

However, corruption also has particular downsides for revolutionary movements. As corruption grievances are diffusely held and minimalist in orientation, they are unable to substitute for a true political program. It is not enough to just desire a more just political and economic world; a movement must also establish plans to build it. This lack of radical envisioning lies at the failure and

moderation of many revolutionary challenges of the past few decades (Beck et al., 2022). Tunisia exemplifies the pattern. The sudden displacement of the regime allowed for a democratic transition but one that was not planned for or even anticipated. As such, Islamists quickly won electoral power and then lost it to competitors who have moved away from democracy. Ironically, a lack of radical envisioning may partly be caused by the plethora of “good governance” advice coming from aid donors, international financial institutions, and NGOs. If a potentially revolutionary coalition outsources its political platform to the thick layer of foreign advisors eager to assist them, this may neuter its revolutionary potential. Grievance-based mobilization also cannot substitute for true organizing (Tufekci, 2018). Broad grievances build coalitions of convenience rather than coalitions of coordination and alliance. While differences among mobilizing actors can be papered over by a focus on corruption, they can easily re-emerge when the moment of protest is over. This is the dynamic that played out in Ukraine in 2004. Once power had changed hands, it became clear that there was no true ideological platform or strategy for the future. As a result, the Orange coalition splintered and elite competition for power resumed. Corruption is also a cudgel for authoritarians. In China, anti-corruption drives suppress opponents and contain popular mobilization. Even today in Ukraine, corruption investigations have been a political tool as much as a progressive one. Corruption grievances and mobilization is thus a two-sided sword for revolutionary challenges. It can enable a mass movement, but it can also give an excuse for elites to repress alternatives.

Attentiveness to systemic, supply-side corruption facilitated by offshore wealth networks may shed light on structural features of institutions that are not always visible to enthusiastic modernizers and reformers. Neoliberal recommendations geared toward limiting the discretion of corruptible public officials and enhancing the scope of market allocation of resources pay little attention to the possibilities of political and social mobilization. However, international institutions can sometimes learn. The turn towards “good governance” in global regimes can be seen as a reaction to the political instability brought about by prior policy programs. Protests during the Latin American debt crises of the 1970s–1980s, in the East Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, and during the Eurozone crisis in the mid-2000s, all targeted austerity policy prescriptions, and the major international financial institutions slowly took notice. As a result, contemporary revolutions now take place in a climate thick with prescriptions and financial incentives geared toward improving governance and reducing corruption in the developing world, post-Soviet transition countries, and, at least since the Eurocrisis of the early 2000s, southern Europe. Yet these same prior examples suggest that the development of an anti-corruption technocracy may have unintended effects on political instability if elites manage to tap offshore wealth networks and deploy anti-corruption drives in a way that shores up their own position. Corruption can be a potent grievance, but corrupt networks may in turn render the problem of creating a more just, equitable, and accessible political and economic system much more difficult than simple overthrow of a given regime. Corruption may introduce a very undesirable form of resilience into political regimes.

Overall, we have theorized that corruption is a central feature of contemporary revolutions, either as a mobilizing mechanism or a tool of elites. Given that political corruption, economic inequality, and popular frustration are only likely to build in the coming decades as world economy and geopolitics shift (Lachmann, 2020), it is far past time for revolution studies to recapture grievances. Grievances should not be analyzed monolithically but unpacked and related to specific mobilizing processes. Only in this way can the complex interplay of grievance, structure, agency, and contingency be understood.

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