GREEN
EUROPEAN
JOURNAL

# Mass Protests Without Revolutions

**An interview with Green European Journal, Vincent Bevins**
June 12, 2025

In recent years, protests and revolts have brought huge crowds to the streets around the world. However, these movements have failed to produce the radical transformations they advocated. In some cases, they have even paved the way for right-wing takeovers and military dictatorships. With protest remaining a popular form of political conflict, what lessons can we learn from a decade of missed revolutions?

***Green European Journal*: Your book, *If We Burn*, is built on the observation that the 2010s saw the biggest mass protests in history – from Egypt to Brazil, Chile, Ukraine, and Hong Kong – but no actual revolutions. What was the outcome of this "mass protest decade"?**

**Vincent Bevins:** The episodes that I chose to look at are ones in which mass protests got so large that they became something else and either led to existing governments being overthrown or fundamentally destabilised societies. What that other thing is that they became – often unexpectedly and unintentionally – is a major question, and the answer varies from case to case. The framework that I use to judge the longterm effects of these revolts is to compare the outcome with what the organisers of the original protests said that they wanted to achieve. In the majority of cases, the people I interviewed said that change went in the wrong direction: they got the opposite of what they were asking for. In other cases, people felt they got some relative victory, but certainly not everything they had mobilised for. Of course, it's not always easy to determine what the original protesters wanted, because there were many conflicting voices on the streets.

You could also use a larger framework. Mark Beissinger, an American political scientist, makes a rough distinction between social revolutions, which change the concrete configurations of power within society, and civic revolutions, which just change who's in charge of the same power structure. Euromaidan in Ukraine in 2014, or the colour revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in the 2000s, did not fundamentally change the structure of power; they often created short-term chaos and increased inequality and internal tension within the bodies where they took place. The cases I write about could be described as civic revolutions. People might have gotten a government with a slightly different name – or something much worse, such as a foreign invasion or a civil war. But none of these movements got the profound social transformation that they dreamed of when they put together the protests in the first place.

Tunis, Tunisia, 20 January 2011. Demonstrators gathered in front of the headquarters of the Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD), the party of former dictator Ben Ali. The crowd demanded the dissolution of the provisional government formed after Ben Ali's departure and the dissolution of the RCD. The protests inspired similar actions throughout the Arab world, in a chain reaction that became known as the Arab Spring. ©AMINE LANDOULSI

**A key reason for this, you argue, is that there is no such thing as a power vacuum. If a protest movement is not ready – or not willing – to seize the centres of power, a more organised group will step in. How did this dynamic play out in Egypt's Tahrir Square, one of the first cases you analyse?**

What becomes known as the Arab Spring starts in Tunisia in 2010, but Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011 defines much of what happened in the following years, not only in the Arab world, but in so many other parts of the world where the Tahrir model was copied – the US, Spain, Greece, Hong Kong, just to name a few.

In January 2011, a group of activists in Cairo puts together a protest against police brutality. It is a group of protesters that has come together for over a decade, creating organisational links through support for Palestine and opposition to the US invasion of Iraq. They expect the usual police repression, but far more people show up than they expect, and even more in the following days. On 28 January, the protest ends up in a battle with the police in the streets. The police lose, rip off their uniforms, and flee into the night. The military is not participating in this confrontation, so in this brief moment, protesters face a power vacuum. They could do many different things, like trying to set up dual power of some kind, or seizing some part of the state, at least the communications apparatus. Instead, they simply take Tahrir Square, because that had been the goal of so many other protests over the years. They stay in the square for 18 days, until the government of Hosni Mubarak falls. Concretely, what happens is that the military takes power, not the square, as much as it might feel like the square has been driving events. In a narrow sense, this is a military coup led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). At least the SCAF promises to hold democratic elections.

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However, the progressive and secular elements of the square, which were so present in coverage of the uprising in 2011 and represent quite a lot of Egyptians, fail to unite behind an electoral outcome, and the Muslim Brotherhood – the largest organised force in the square – wins in the second round. It governs the country in a way that is quite satisfactory for a lot of Egyptians, also considering that a transition to democracy usually happens in quite a bumpy and chaotic way.

But in June 2013, a petition drive that represents itself as a continuation of the spirit of 2011 puts together a large set of protests, which end up paving the way for a military coup. The military acts with the backing of Gulf monarchies, and ultimately of the Obama administration, to carry out a counter-revolutionary military coup and establish the dictatorship that has been in power to this day.

If there had been some kind of revolutionary organisation leading the revolt or able to make a bid to do so, protesters could have done more than just take Tahrir Square. But there was no such group, and the opportunity was missed.

**In Brazil, the country you followed most closely, a wave of successful leftist protests also paved the way to an unintended result: the extreme right-wing presidency of Jair Bolsonaro. How did this happen?**

The case of Brazil shows that freedom can mean very different things to different groups of people. The initial group, the Movimento Passe Livre ("Free Fare Movement", MPL), was made up of leftist, autonomous anarchists who demanded free-fare public transit for all Brazilian citizens. By 2013, they had been regularly organising protests for eight years. But in June 2013, the Brazilian mainstream media, which is rightleaning and oligarch-owned, called for a crackdown. The crackdown came at the hands of the Brazilian military police, which is a legacy of the US-backed dictatorship.

Tbilisi, Georgia, 9 March 2023. Protesters demonstrating against the "foreign agents" law, introducing a registry for media and NGOs receiving more than 20 per cent of their funding from abroad. The law was initially withdrawn but reintroduced in 2024, causing new waves of protests. ©MARIAM GIUNASHVILI

That crackdown so shocked Brazilian civil society, including the very media that had called for it, that there was an outpouring of support for the protests. But the mainstream media and the larger group of people who joined the protests at that point were not going to get behind anarchist direct action and the full decommodification of public transportation. They entered into initially verbal but ultimately violent conflict with the original leftist protesters and expelled many of them from the streets. At

this point, a group of young Brazilians who worked for US-backed neoliberal think tanks concluded – correctly, in my view – that the meaning of the streets was up for grabs. They could contest what the protests were about in some fundamental sense. And as a way of re-signifying what was happening, this group of well-organised and externally funded students decided to take the original phrase, Movimento Passe Livre (MPL), and change it into Movimento Brasil Livre ("Free Brazil Movement", MBL). They chose an acronym that looked very similar, but their understanding of freedom was incredibly different. They had a very North American and libertarian conception of freedom as a zero-sum relationship between civil society and the state.

Over the following two years, this group led a new set of protests against democratically elected President Dilma Rousseff, ultimately calling for her impeachment, which did take place in 2016, and then campaigning for extreme-right Jair Bolsonaro and taking power alongside him in 2019. This group had stolen the style and reputation of a group that was autonomist, and now it entered the state so that it could destroy it.

**Two principles guided, more or less explicitly, the protest movements you analyse – horizontalism and prefiguration. What are they, and why do they matter in understanding the outcome of the revolts?**

Horizontality is an approach to political organising that insists there should be no hierarchy whatsoever. Anti-hierarchical movements and experiments have existed for a very long time, most notably in the 1960s, although the word horizontalidad comes from Argentina in the early 21st century. In response to economic and state collapse, assemblies were formed that anybody could join, nobody led, and had no pretence of creating representative structures or a new state. Horizontalism is a slightly different thing because it's not just a descriptive term but a normative one. Brazil's MPL, for example, believed that horizontality was the right way to organise their movement. Puerta del Sol in Spain and Occupy Wall Street in the US had some horizontalist principles too, whereas in Egypt, horizontality was mostly the result of an inability to coordinate representative structures.

Horizontalist groups tend to be very concerned with prefiguration. In its normative sense, prefiguration is based on the conviction that you will never create the society you want to create unless it is already reflected in the movement you have now. In Tahrir Square, people of different political ideologies, classes, and religious attitudes came together and fed and protected each other. This seemed to be proof of what Egyptians could achieve, and it contributed to making people excited about coming to the square.

From a radically anti-authoritarian perspective, a revolt is supposed to grow and grow until it becomes the new state itself, the seed of a new society. In Brazil, the concrete horizontality of the protests was related to the ideological horizontalism of the original protesters, who didn't really believe in leadership. Everybody felt invited to the streets, as long as they had some kind of complaint about Brazilian society. Horizontalism allowed protests to scale up in a huge way.

The same happened in Istanbul's Gezi Park in the same year. The prefigurative elements made it a more satisfying and attractive place to be. People were eating and conversing together. Their roles in the capitalist society fell away, and they were having a shared experience that was really meaningful on a personal level, even if it wasn't going to replace the government.

Horizontalism becomes a problem in phase two, because when you have no means for coordinating, you are incapable of entering a power vacuum or even putting together the best electoral strategy possible, as happened in Egypt. In Brazil, President Dilma Rousseff wanted to give the streets the change they demanded, but she couldn't even figure out what they were asking for, because they were asking for as many things as there were people, perhaps more.

Prefiguration poses similar issues, because it imposes a strict ideological limit on what is acceptable. In the 2010s, we saw the creation of revolutionary situations. And when existing elites feel threatened, they respond with counterrevolutionary violence. Now, if someone invades your village and starts to kill everybody, you probably don't want to respond by acting in the way that you hope to live after they leave, as prefiguration would ask you to.

**The protest movements you analyse have a potent component of collective action, often in opposition to neoliberalism and its ideals of individualism. But the absolute rejection of representation and hierarchy could also be read as individualism in its purest form – the conviction that no one can speak on your behalf. How do you make sense of this paradox?**

It's a strange paradox, but I would say that both things are true at the same time. As Ukrainian sociologist Volodymyr Ishchenko has argued, many of the revolts that we saw in the 2010s can be interpreted as responses to the crisis of representation in the neoliberalised global system. People increasingly don't trust their governments, because the modern

state responds primarily to economic elites, essentially ignoring regular citizens, unless they can get some faction of the ruling class to push their struggle for them.

But in other ways, these revolts reproduced internally some aspects and approaches of the system in which they took place. Argentinian historian Ezequiel Adamovsky, one of the more eloquent intellectuals of the movement that organised the occupations in the early 2000s that led to the popularisation of horizontalism, told me that they were responding to the concrete failure of representative institutions – the firm, the state, the union, the party – but they were probably also influenced by neoliberal ideas of freedom and anti-state discourse that were widespread in pro-privatisation media in Argentina.

You could argue that these movements were subjectively anti-systemic but objectively pro-systemic, because through the form they ended up taking, they created opportunities that pre-existing power structures took advantage of.

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**Mass protests are a relatively recent form of political conflict, the emergence of which is closely linked to the amplifying effect of mass media. But the revolts of the 2010s were also propelled and influenced by the new online media. How did these two types of media interact and contribute to shaping the major protest movements of the last decade?**

Initially, many interpretations were offered, especially in the liberal English-speaking media, that these were social media revolutions. But what is clear, with the benefit of hindsight, is that social media was one of many parts that made these revolts possible. And to the extent that social media had a role, it was interacting with legacy media. Journalists working for traditional outlets, including myself, were looking at social media, posting on social media, getting information from social media. People on social media were reading legacy outlets and discussing them on social media. It's hard to disentangle these two phenomena, and I think there's no reason to do so.

The media made it so that a lot more people wanted to join the protests and define their meaning, because, as you rightly put it, these revolts were unable or unwilling to represent to the larger world what they were really about. But media representations themselves can reshape what's happening in the revolt. In Brazil, the groups that came into the streets with different ideas had gotten those ideas from the media. And inevitably, the way that the protest was presented to them in the media influenced what they thought it was. Quite often, two people found themselves on the street, physically standing in the same space, but mentally attending two different protests.

In Ukraine, what became called Euromaidan was initially a relatively small group of people protesting against President Viktor Yanukovych's decision not to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Those people believed in that cause; they had coherent claims for why they wanted that agreement to be signed. But this was not an issue supported by a majority of Ukrainians. Only after a crackdown on the protesters did a lot more people join the square in central Kyiv. These people had found out about the crackdown, thought it was revolting, and wanted to take action. They also brought different demands. There were actual fights in the street over the meaning of the square. Anything that anybody believed about Maidan, unless they were physically there and doing their own field research, came from differing media interpretations. Before Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022, I met people in the same family who had different ideas of what had happened because they watched different media. Those watching Russianlanguage media were much more likely to consume images of the farright elements that were present in the square. People in the West tended to get the narrative that the protests were all about joining the EU.

In the early 2010s, there was also this widespread belief that social media was about unmediated self-representation and truthful citizen journalism. Now everyone knows that well-financed individuals and groups can distort messages on social media, and that the narratives that emerge from the billions of snapshots of reality produced every single day can be misleading. With this huge multiplication of facts, there is inevitably some selection, which is done by an algorithm built to maximise advertising revenue. Even things that are narrowly true – like a real photograph posted on social media – can contribute to producing misleading narratives.

Istanbul, Türkiye, 23 March 2025. Riot police officers use pepper spray to clear a protester during a demonstration after Istanbul's Mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu was arrested and sent to prison. İmamoğlu's arrest sparked the largest wave of protests in Türkiye since Gezi Park in 2013. ©HUSEYİN ALDEMIR

**Aside from Brazil, was freedom present – as an ideal horizon or a concrete demand – in the protest movements you investigate?**

At a shallow level, freedom can mean whatever you want. You could say that any protest that has ever existed was a protest for freedom. However, the interpretation of what that means might be very different, depending on who you ask. What was interesting about the 2010s is that you saw a more or less similar repertoire of contention, a similar tactical and organisational approach, across wildly different social, economic, and political contexts. The subjective content of each protest varied widely, and so did the interaction with the concept of freedom. In the case of Tunisia, Egypt, or Bahrain, you could correctly read these revolts as a demand for freedom from the existing regime. In Turkey, you could call it freedom from encroachment on public space. You could interpret the anti-austerity protests happening around the same time in Southern Europe as a desire to be free to participate in the economy, to be employed, and to benefit from the social welfare state constructed by previous generations. In Ukraine, the initial protesters wanted the freedom to join the EU, but signing the Association Agreement also meant quite a lot of new rules and economic changes, which would create new winners and losers. People also interpret and remember their own lives in different ways at different points in history. Today, more Ukrainians would probably interpret those protests as a demand for freedom from Russia.

Kyiv, Ukraine, 14 December 2013. Protesters gather in Maidan Nezalezhnosti (Independence Square) during a concert of the Ukrainian band Okean Elzy. The Revolution of Dignity, following the Euromaidan protests, culminated in the ousting of President Viktor Yanukovych. According to official data, 106 protesters were killed in clashes with riot police. ©JULIA KOCHETOVA

In horizontally structured protests that allow for a cacophonous – sometimes even contradictory – range of claims to be made at the same time, the concepts that tend to win that battle for the definition of the narrative need to be broad enough and entirely positive, no matter what your politics is. In the 2010s, we saw concepts like democracy, freedom, and anti-corruption bubbling to the top, because all three are terms that everyone agrees with. The people in Hong Kong were fighting for democracy, but the People's Republic of China is, in its own discourse, a democratic state. For a lot of the Egyptians who put together the protests of January 2011, it was obvious that the construction of a democratic Egypt would challenge US imperialism and the interests of its allies in the region, Saudi Arabia and Israel. But in the eyes of a CNN correspondent, Egyptians were demanding the freedom to be like us, to copy our political system and join the US as a junior ally.

When it comes to these big terms, the devil is really in the details.

*When it comes to big terms like "freedom", the devil is really in the details.*

**Did environmentalism play a role in the major revolts of the 2010s? And based on the lessons learned from the protests you looked at, what will it take for the ecological movement to succeed?**

Revolts in places like Egypt and Bahrain had primarily political content because they were dealing with obvious and restrictive repression in the political realm. Their main focus was transforming the political order, rather than ecological questions. But in countries like Turkey, Brazil, and Chile, the revolts had explicit ecological content. The Gezi Park protests started in defence of public green spaces, and green activists were the first to get involved. In Brazil, progressives are quite automatically environmentalists, pro-Indigenous rights, and for the protection of the Amazon. Bolsonaro, on the other hand, came to power with the very explicit project of completing the colonisation of Brazil, ending Indigenous sovereignty, and transforming more of the Amazon into economically productive land.

I am convinced that the struggle to transform the existing global economy into one that is less destructive of our planet will be one of the primary challenges of the 21st century. Many of the major protests of the 2010s had an explicit or implicit anti-state bias. But whether we like it or not, the existing arrangement of states that make up the global system is going to be fundamental for saving the planet from climate catastrophe. We will need a change in regulations and interstate relations. We will need cooperation between the two most important states in the global system, the United States and China, even though things are not looking good right now. So the rejection of the state as a terrain of struggle would be a mistake.

There's a lot that protest movements can do. They can change who makes decisions, show existing elites what they care about, and impose real costs upon them that make it more rational for them to act responsibly. All of this will be important.

**Despite the adverse outcomes of many revolts, most of the revolutionaries you spoke to do not recommend burying the hatchet. The first half of the 2020s also shows that mass protests – from Black Lives Matter to Iran, Serbia, and Georgia – remain a very popular form of political conflict. Do you see the tactics and structure of protests changing compared to the past years?**

The particular form of protest that I describe came about for both ideological and material reasons. It became what was possible to do and easier to carry out compared to other forms of struggle. In the 2020s, there has been ideological evolution to some extent. Nowadays, there is less of a belief that spontaneity and structurelessness are inherently good. I see less insistence on the idea that every claim is equally important and that everyone can join and speak with equal authority. In the pro-Palestinian encampments in the US, for example, there has been a very intentional process of selecting media representatives and making sure that people can't just show up and talk to whoever they want about the meaning of the protests.

However, the material conditions have remained largely the same. Apparently spontaneous, digitally coordinated, horizontally structured mass protests remain the easiest thing to do compared to creating organisations capable of long-term collective action and quick and effective coordination.

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Published June 12, 2025
Interview in English
Published in the *Green European Journal*
Downloaded from https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/mass-protests-without-revolutions/

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