

Contemporary protests are embracing an 'open door' policy

October 24 2011

As the "Arab Spring" turns to fall and New York's "Occupy Wall Street" protest continues to draw international headlines, a new model of social and political protest has emerged. Based on informal leadership and a multitude of voices, contemporary protests have the potential to become more widespread than ever before.

In her lab, Dr. Tali Hatuka of Tel Aviv University's Department of Geography and the Human Environment analyzes not only the environmental features that impact protests, but the methodology behind the protests themselves. In the last decade, she says, there has been a major shift in the way citizens take to the streets. "Contemporary protests do not look for a unified group. Instead, protestors reflect a variety of outlooks and positions. It's a mass compound of different groups coming together under a general slogan," she explains. "Protests nowadays are based on four principles: difference, decentralization, multiplicity, and informal order."

Her research, which has appeared in the journal *Metropolitica* and will be the topic of a forthcoming book, attributes the viral-like growth of contemporary protests to the acceptance of different voices under the same ideological umbrella.

All protesters welcome

According to Dr. Hatuka, February 15, 2003, was a crucial, watershed

moment. On that day, a worldwide protest was organized against the American invasion of Iraq. The protest spanned more than 800 cities, and participants were encouraged to contribute their own voices and opinions. This was a distinct break from the protests of the 1990's, which were localized and focused on national issues.

Demonstrations in the twentieth century, such as those challenging large and imposing regimes throughout communist Europe, followed a more traditional organization, she says. Protesters were fairly passive, and the message and direction of the protest were shaped by a centralized group of organizers.

Now, the ability of a protest to spread relies on its capacity to bring together a multitude of media, leaders, and points-of-view in a complex way. Though different groups now come together for a common cause, Dr. Hatuka explains, they often maintain their identity through the action. The organizational structure of protests is like a web instead of a strict hierarchy, which contributes to the widespread dissemination of different protests in different places. In Israel, the 2011 summer protests that called for "social justice" included rallies and tent communities that arose in cities all across the nation. These multiple actions and their geographical spread ultimately allowed for a protest much larger in scale.

The word on the street

With a new era of mass protest emerging, politicians must be aware of what is happening on the ground, says Dr. Hatuka. There are no guarantees that political leaders can meet a crowd's demands, but they should certainly be more attentive to the expressed needs. Recent uprisings, such as those in Egypt and Libya, have successfully toppled governments that long turned a deaf ear to their citizens.

This could force governments, which have an inherently pyramid-like

structure of power, to become attentive to an increasingly influential web of citizens -- a positive change, Dr. Hatuka says. Contemporary protests are a reflection of citizens' desire to fight perceived injustice. Today, thanks to education and new forms of media, they are much more knowledgeable about their rights, power, and ability to make a change -- and they are demanding to change public discourse and affect policy decisions, she concludes.

Provided by Tel Aviv University

Citation: Contemporary protests are embracing an 'open door' policy (2011, October 24)
retrieved 3 May 2024 from
<https://phys.org/news/2011-10-contemporary-protests-embracing-door-policy.html>

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