Protests and Uprisings
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Protests and Uprisings

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Photo Credits:

Back Cover: A boy shouts slogans during a rally to demand that Yemen’s President Ali Abdullah step down.

Title Page: Hundreds of antigovernment protestors return to Cairo’s Tahrir Square after the Egyptian president fired his cabinet but refused to step down.

Table of Contents: In 2011, thousands protest the state governor’s proposed budget bill in Madison, Wisconsin. The bill restricts the rights of government workers to bargain.

Correlation

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Introduction

What would you do if the people in charge of running your school decided to serve only Brussels sprouts and carrot juice for lunch? What if they kept doing it, week after week? Would you speak out so students could have more choice in the foods they ate? Would you organize a protest with other kids? Would you march and carry signs?

If you took these actions to try to change the food choices, you would be rising up against those who control your school cafeteria.

Throughout history, people have protested to stop unfair treatment. These protests have been both large and small. Some have involved dozens of people, and others have involved tens of thousands of people. When large numbers of people rise up against authority to protest how they are treated, these protests are often called uprisings.
People around the world are citizens of countries. Countries are ruled or managed by governments. But governments are not all the same. Some governments have greedy leaders who spend money to benefit only the people in power and those who support them. Other governments do not allow their citizens to have the common freedoms that most people treasure. Those governments do not allow people to speak freely. They do not allow people to gather peacefully to protest government policies or try to bring about change. They don’t allow people the freedom to practice the religion of their choice or read or listen to whatever they want. Those governments want total authority, or control, over their citizens.

A famous American, Martin Luther King Jr., once said, “There is something in the soul that cries out for freedom.” Sometimes people who are denied freedom or fair treatment gather the courage to rise up against their governments and attempt to change them. Political uprisings like these have gone on through history, and they continue today.

An uprising is usually planned by a group of people who want to change the way things are run or the person who is in charge. Most political uprisings have as their goal to take control away from the government in power. In some cases, the people who try to take control are no better than the ones they want to overthrow. However, many people who lead political uprisings want better treatment for all people. In the following pages, you will read about governments and uprisings that included thousands of people. You’ll learn why people rise up and how people around the world have brought about change.

The people of southern Sudan vote in 2011 to become independent from northern Sudan after decades of fighting.
Types of Uprisings

Uprisings can be led by political groups or even individuals who are trying to take power or change the way things are. Uprisings can also grow from ordinary people leading protests to change laws or remove the people who rule from power. The ordinary people who join in an uprising can be young and old, male and female, rich and poor, and they may belong to many different religions and cultural groups.

Political uprisings can be mostly peaceful, or they can be violent. The violent uprisings are often referred to with words such as rebellion, revolt, coup (KOO), insurrection, or civil war. These uprisings use force to overthrow a government.

Peaceful uprisings usually involve marches and gatherings where people give speeches and often chant slogans. Sometimes people go on strike, or refuse to work. These uprisings are attempts to bring about a change in government, leadership, or conditions—without the use of force. Peaceful protests sometimes become violent if the police or military try to stop them.

Government: The Will of the People?

Many countries around the world have a type of government known as a democracy. The word democracy comes from the Greek word demos, meaning “people.” A democracy is a form of government in which the people have the power to elect leaders and make laws through those they elect. In most democracies, the majority rules, but laws grant equal rights and freedoms to all people. The rights might include freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Democracies usually avoid giving all power to a single central government. A system of checks and balances usually keeps one branch of the government from gaining too much power.

Many countries are not democracies. Some represent the will of the people in other ways. But in some countries, the citizens have very little freedom and no voice in their government. The leaders are often greedy, using what money the country has to benefit only a few. Leaders of these governments hold on to power by using a strong military or police force to keep citizens under control. These countries are often known as police states or dictatorships.
Protests and Uprisings of the Past

Let’s look at a few of the best-known uprisings that have taken place around the world over the years.

United States

American Revolution

In the last half of the 1700s, people living in the thirteen colonies, along what is now the east coast of the United States, began to protest being under the rule of Great Britain. The colonists felt that they had no voice in the laws that were being created across the Atlantic Ocean by the British government. The colonists set up their own local governments and held protests against taxes and other British laws. One of the most famous protests was the Boston Tea Party. The people in the colonies didn’t feel they should have to pay taxes to the British government on tea shipped to the colonies. One night, men living in Boston boarded British ships carrying tea. To protest having no voice in government, they threw crates of tea in the water. In time, this protest and others led to a violent war. The war brought about independence for the colonies. These colonies formed the United States of America.

Civil Rights Movement

The United States saw many years of protests in the mid-1900s by people demanding that African Americans be treated the same as other U.S. citizens. Because of the color of their skin, African Americans were denied the same freedoms—their civil rights. Martin Luther King Jr., who believed in peaceful forms of protest, led the movement to gain their civil rights. He led marches and planned sit-ins. During sit-ins, African Americans would sit at lunch counters and other places where they were not allowed until the police removed them and took them to jail. Finally, after years of protest, in 1964 the United States passed the Civil Rights Act, which granted African Americans the same legal rights as other citizens. Years of protests by African Americans and others who believed in equal rights for all Americans succeeded in improving laws and gaining treatment that was more fair.
India

For many years before 1947, India was a colony in the British Empire. A man named Mohandas Gandhi (mo-HAWN-dus GAWN-dee) led the uprising for India’s independence from Great Britain. Many of his protests were also aimed at gaining rights and freedoms for women, farmers, workers, and poor people. Gandhi was a small, gentle, soft-spoken man who believed in peaceful protest. He often fasted, or went without food for days, as a way to protest unfair conditions. Gandhi did more to provide freedom, equality, and a voice for the Indian people than anyone in India’s history.

China

China is a communist state. The Chinese Communist Party controls the rights of the people of China and limits their freedoms. In 1989, many young people gathered in Tiananmen Square, in the heart of China’s capital city of Beijing. They began protesting against the government and demanding changes toward a more democratic government. The protests lasted for about seven weeks and spread to other cities around China.
Finally the government called out the military to stop the protests. Army troops fired on the crowds and killed hundreds of protestors. Leaders of the protests were placed in jail. Members of the government who agreed with the protestors were removed from office. Since that protest, the Chinese government has slowly granted more rights to its people, but it still controls many aspects of the Chinese people’s lives.

**Modern Uprisings**

People in Tunisia and Egypt recently held uprisings against their governments. In both countries, the people were able to force their leaders to step down.

In Tunisia, terrible unemployment and unfair treatment by the government led to the country’s largest protests in many years. Thousands of protestors from all walks of life flooded the country’s capital to demand that the president give up power. The violent protests forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (ZIN el AWB-deen ben AW-Lee) to quit. After twenty-three years of rule, he was driven from power on January 14, 2011.

The uprising sent a powerful message to other governments in the Middle East. It also sparked a chain reaction of uprisings in that region. In Egypt, hundreds of thousands of Egyptian citizens flooded the streets on January 25, 2011, gathering mostly in Tahrir Square, in the center of Cairo. They demanded that Hosni Mubarak (HOSE-nee moo-BAR-ack), who had led Egypt for thirty years, quit.
The protestors felt that Mubarak was to blame for the troubles that many of Egypt’s citizens suffered. A large number of Egyptian workers are paid only about two dollars a day for their work. Others can’t find work at all. Besides low wages and poor working conditions, many Egyptians were also unhappy about an unfair law that Mubarak had supported for many years. Mubarak used this law, the police, and the prisons to silence anyone who opposed him. Egyptians wanted change: freedom and fair elections.

In large part, these recent uprisings grew thanks to the Internet. In fact, some called the Egyptian uprising an “Internet revolution.” Planners were able to communicate with thousands of people using websites such as Facebook and Twitter. Cell phones played an important role as well. The protestors grew in number, refusing to give up until Mubarak stepped down.

The police and the army were called out to control the protests, and while there was some violence and several hundred people died, the protests were mostly peaceful. Finally, after eighteen days of protests, Mubarak agreed to give up power. The military took over, putting the normal rules of government on hold and promising to hold free elections in a few months.
Many questions remain over the future of Egypt. Who will govern? Will religious groups take over and run the government? Will the military hold free elections as it has promised? Will the citizens of Egypt be satisfied, or will more uprisings follow? Will wages and living conditions improve with Mubarak out of power? Will rights that have long been denied be returned? Only time will provide answers to these and other questions. For now, the uprising in Egypt has shown the power of the people once they unite.

Egypt Uprising Timeline

In January 2011, Hosni Mubarak had been in power for three decades. Once Egypt’s uprisings began, Mubarak resigned in under three weeks.

Jan. 25 Thousands of demonstrators join in a “day of rage.” They shout “Down with Mubarak” in Cairo’s Tahrir Square.

Jan. 28–29 Before midnight, Mubarak announces he is dismissing his government. Riots continue through the night.

Jan. 31 Protestors continue to defy a curfew imposed by the military. About 250,000 people gather in Tahrir Square.

Feb. 1 Mubarak announces he will not run for a sixth term but refuses to step down. The number of protestors is now estimated at more than one million.

Feb. 2 After a five-day blackout meant to quiet protests, Internet services in Cairo are partially restored.

Feb. 7 In an attempt to calm the angry masses, Egypt’s government approves a 15 percent raise to salaries and pensions.

Feb. 10 Mubarak says he will remain in power until September. Protestors wave their shoes in dismay.

Feb. 11 Mubarak resigns as president and hands over power to the army.

The successful protests in Egypt and Tunisia have inspired people in neighboring countries to hold protests as well. Citizens in countries such as Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen began holding protests in February 2011.

But not all these uprisings have been peaceful. Libya is ruled by Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi (MUH-em-ar awl kuh-DAW-fee), a dictator who seized power in 1969 by overthrowing the Libyan government. Since that time, he has ruled with the use of extreme force and fear.

When protests for democracy and freedom began in his country, Qaddafi shut down the Internet and other forms of communication. Worse, he lashed out with a level of violence unseen in other Middle Eastern uprisings. In the early stages of the uprising, there were reports of many hundreds of deaths, with the likelihood of more to come.
In Libya and other countries undergoing various stages of protest, doubt remains over the final outcome of these protests. People around the world hope that these protests and uprisings will benefit the lives of all citizens and provide them common freedoms that most people desire.

Conclusion

Throughout history, when people feel they are being treated unfairly and denied freedoms, they have held protests and uprisings against those in power. We have seen these types of movements in the United States and in other countries around the world. We see them today in many Middle Eastern countries. When people unite in large numbers and speak with one voice, they often have the power to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

Glossary

authority (n.)  the power, or those with the power, to govern or give orders (p. 4)

checks and balances (n.)  the division of power among branches of government so that no one branch can dominate the others (p. 8)

communist (adj.)  of, relating to, or supporting Communism (p. 12)

dictatorships (n.)  governments ruled by leaders who take control without approval from the people (p. 8)

force (n.)  the use of violence or military action (p. 7)

independence (n.)  freedom from the control, influence, support, or help of others (p. 9)

overthrow (v.)  to defeat or remove from power (p. 6)

police states (n.)  states that limit the rights of people through the threat or use of police power (p. 8)

protest (n.)  an action to express strong disagreement or disapproval (p. 4)

revolution (n.)  the removal of a government from power by force and its replacement with another (p. 16)

slogans (n.)  catchy phrases used to promote a product, a service, or a political movement (p. 7)

uprisings (n.)  popular revolts against established authorities (p. 4)