The Arab Revolutions of 2011: Roots and Prospects

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THE END OF **2010** AND THE BEGINNING OF **2011** brought about the surprising spread of revolutions across North Africa and several other Arab countries. While many scholars and observers have spoken about repressive conditions under the autocratic regimes in those countries, it is difficult for anyone to claim that they had anticipated such sweeping and popular uprisings. Among those who envisioned some sort of eventual protest against repression and abuse of the rule of law, none foresaw the dramatic outcomes witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya and the events as they have unfolded in Syria and Yemen.

Scholars and observers have tended to frame political struggle in the contemporary Arab world as one between autocratic regimes that derived legitimacy from the mid-twentieth-century struggle against colonization and western occupation and radical Islamist groups that vow to establish theocracies. These same scholars and observers are now predicting, with seeming confidence, that this revolutionary wave has not crested and that the Arab world, in its entirety, will experience major democratic transformation. I optimistically agree.

POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS

The factors leading to the Arab revolutions are numerous. Discerning them requires a careful review of historical events that shaped the region during the previous century, international relations of the last several decades—in particular the war on terror and the rise of transnational radical Islamist groups—and the dynamics of new media and its influence among frustrated youths with collapsed hopes for upward mobility.

Having suffered under western occupation and colonization since the nineteenth century, in the 1950s and 1960s the educated elites of newly carved-out Arab nation-states led the struggles of their people to gain independence while internally debating and sometimes fighting over asserting their national, Arab, Islamic, and modern identities. The Arab nations that gained independence around mid-century were led by prominent figures from the independence struggles who ruled as monarchs or mili-

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tary elites. Following the emergence of new ruling establishments, most states experienced internal power struggles and conflicts among adherents of various political and religious affiliations. Such jockeying for position led those in control of government (and resources) to develop harsh security apparatuses and measures to protect themselves against competitors.

Establishing modern systems of democratic institutions and granting citizens freedoms were risks that those who had seized political power were unwilling to take for fear of losing their grip on power. The legacy of western colonization, coupled with instability stemming from the Arab-Israeli conflict, compounded the fears of Arab rulers, leading to the institutionalization of repression and suppression of civil liberties. The emergence of the cold war in the 1950s and the competition between the superpowers that lasted until the late 1980s exacerbated inter- and intra-Arab conflicts, creating a discourse in the Arab world around the competing ideologies of socialism and communism versus western democracy and capitalism. Arab nationalists and Islamists at that time aligned themselves with one discourse or the other.

The Israeli military defeat of Egypt in June 1967, and with it the Arab nationalist project of Gamal Abdel Nasser, added to the disillusion of educated Arab elites and the masses. That event led to further repression, as threats to ruling regimes and instability grew. On the ideological level, the Islamic discourse, with its deep roots in a glorified history of a long-ago victorious utopian Muslim superpower, was held up for comparison with the repressive and defeated regimes of the twentieth century. For many, the equation was simple: Muslims had prevailed when they followed their religion properly, and they became losers when they deviated from it, having been led astray down socialist, communist, and capitalist paths. The solution was also straightforward: Muslims must return to the true practices of their religion to revive the glories of the past. According to adherents of Islamic revivalism, it is the duty of each Muslim to do all that he or she can—including, for the radicals among them, employing force—to establish Islamist states and societies. Thus the stage was set for a new wave of modern political Islam. Although the majorities of political Islamists sought to achieve their goals peacefully, small, violent minorities opted for militancy. The latter viewed the ruling regimes and western powers as their enemies. Their violent struggle against them began in the late 1970s and continues to this day.

The growing influence of militant Islamists only added to the fears of the Arab ruling regimes and led to the use of brute force to suppress it. Most Arab leaders clung to power for life with the aspiration of transferring it to their sons, viewing such successions as another measure toward securing the state against threats to stability. The successful and smooth transfer from Syrian president Hafiz al-Asad to his son Bashar in 2000 inspired other Arab rulers to follow suit. The North African rulers of Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia continued to busy themselves coaching their sons to take the baton. This practice is known as *tawreeth* (giving inheritance) in the Arab world. To ensure the success of tawreeth, and maintenance of power within the family or tribe, Arab regimes indulged in election rigging and practices of intimidation that at times included violence and repressive measures to control the supposedly democratic, representative institutions of their nations.

The end of the cold war, which left one superpower intact, forged new alliances in the Arab world and coincided with the growth of militant Islamist threats to the Arab and Islamic regimes and also placed the United States in the line of fire of radical

groups. Attacks on U.S. facilities around the world in the 1990s, including embassies, culminated in 2001 in the September 11 al-Qaida attacks on the U.S. mainland.

To curb this threat, the U.S. 'war on terror' created new alliances between Arab regimes and the United States, leading to enhanced repression of liberties and democratic institutions and to gross violations of human rights in the Arab world and elsewhere. Some North African states employed their fair share of such practices, and some became notorious for using their torture machinery against suspects delivered by the United States to their prisons to extract confessions. Even for some of the most ardent, bleeding-heart democrats, preserving autocratic Arab regimes—and enabling the alienation and repression that they engendered—became a better (that is, safer) option than an Arab version of a Taliban regime, an Iranian-style Islamist state, or non-state actors with a global reach.

The 'new world order' of the post–cold war era dictated liberal economic, trade, and business policies and practices worldwide. For developing countries, including those in North Africa, such economic reforms meant that political elites had to introduce and implement new policies and cooperate with business elites if they were to obtain economic assistance from western institutions. In the context of the Arab world, this particular marriage of political and business elites led to the emergence of a new class of mega-billionaires, whose control over national resources depended on the preservation of the ruling order. Corruption on a massive scale increased the already substantial concentration of wealth and political power in the hands of rulers, their entourages, and business elites.

The race to accumulate wealth took place at the expense of development and services to the poor. While the wealth of elites reached unprecedented levels, more people lived below the poverty line and lacked access to basic services, such as housing and health care, and basic commodities, such as bread. Privatization policies, dictated by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, increased unemployment and accelerated the pace of corruption as regimes sold off state-owned economic institutions through shady deals. Despite the proliferation of education and higher degrees, growing numbers of young people found themselves unemployed, many unable to move forward with the next stage of their lives. Many of them knew only of life under emergency laws or similar repressive regimes, had been confronted by corruption at government offices in return for the services they sought, and had experienced or witnessed abuses of power by police.

ALIENATION AND REPRESSION: SPARKS OF REVOLUTION

Under the circumstances described above, it would only be natural if some among Arab youth turned to political Islam, including violent forms of it, or sought some other outlet for their frustration. Even for more economically advantaged youth, political repression and the prospect of tawreeth had created a sense of political alienation. With increased exposure to new media, and through it, access to worlds beyond theirs, even well-to-do youth grew frustrated with the ruling regimes. News of corruption at the political and business levels and the growing gap between the destitute majority and the small group of extremely rich elites added to their disgust. From the regimes' perspective, these frustrations represented threats to stability and their hold on power. They used increasingly harsh measures to confront the threat from radical-

ized youths and those bent on disrupting the 'democratic' institutions of their governments. The result was the institutionalization of alienation and repression. When the threat of militant Islamist groups to the United States and other powers in the world is added to the mix, one can understand why alienation and repression in the Arab world have been accepted even by those who claim to be the guardians of democracy and civil liberties. Life in such an environment eventually overwhelmed one young Tunisian man who would unwittingly change the Arab world.

Mohamed Bouazizi was from the small town of Boukhadra. He had a high school degree but had been unable to find a suitable job. Having to provide for his family, he worked as a street vendor selling vegetables in Sidi Bouzid. A police officer repeatedly harassed him for selling vegetables without the proper license. On 17 December 2010, she confiscated Bouazizi's cart and then allegedly slapped him, spat on him, and insulted his deceased father when he tried to pay the fine for not having a permit. When Bouazizi tried to complain to municipal authorities about his treatment, they turned him away. Humiliated and without hope, Bouazizi set himself on fire that day. He lived for two weeks before dying.[1]

The news of Bouazizi's self-immolation and the reasons behind it induced outrage and sparked popular protests among Tunisia's youth, who empathized with his frustration and humiliation. The first protest in Boukhadra started with slogans calling on the state to attend to issues of inflation and unemployment. Protesters' demands then expanded to ending political repression and corruption. In response to the brutal and lethal use of force by the police against demonstrators, those protesting began to chant, 'The People Demand to Topple the Regime'. As the protests spread from small towns to municipal centers and into Tunis, the capital, they brought together cross-sections of Tunisian society, young and old, men and women, rich and poor, religious and secular.

President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and his regime attempted to respond to the protesters' demands by shuffling the cabinet and promising to grant liberties and to change the constitution. Nonetheless, as the use of police force against protesters continued, the demand to overthrow the regime increased. On 14 January 2011, Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia along with family members and others of his entourage who managed to escape. Arabs across North Africa and the Middle East watched events unfold on television and through social media.

REVOLUTION SPREADS

In Egypt, calls went out for anti-government demonstrations to be held on 25 January 2011, National Police Day, which was chosen to call attention to the history of police brutality. Almost following the same pattern of events in Tunisia, demonstrations and protester demands led President Hosni Mubarak to step down on 11 February 2011, after thirty years in power. A few days later, Libyans took to the streets, after which the regime sent forth special military forces to embark on a campaign of intimidation through killing and destruction. The situation in Libya at press exhibits all the characteristics of a civil war and includes foreign intervention from NATO (at the behest

1. For more information, see Rania Abouzeid, 'Bouazizi: The man who set himself and Tunisia on fire', *Time,* 21 January 2011, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2043557,00.html.

of the UN Security Council). Full-blown popular rebellions also took shape in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen. Protests in Jordan and Morocco elicited some minor reforms. With the exception of Libya, where rebellion transformed into bloody civil war, the Arab revolutions share a number of characteristics.

Civic Revolution. Most scholars and observers had predicted that the toppling of repressive Arab regimes would come at the hands of 'even-worse' radical (and autocratic) Islamist groups. This was not the case in Egypt and Tunisia, where the revolutions represented all sectors of society and were non-religious in nature. Religious groups took part in the demonstrations, and while they made their presence known, they also made it clear that they were not imposing their banners on others. These revolutions illustrate how cross-sections of society can participate in common cause, in this case bringing about democratic reform, by striking a balance between their secular, religious, or other identities while sharing in their broader national identity.

Opposing Political Repression and Corruption. In the revolutions of the Arab Spring, the strongest demands were for political reforms, starting with toppling the existing regimes. Economic demands, although issued and having served as triggers in the early stages of the revolutions, appeared to be secondary compared to protesters' political demands.

Nonviolent Action. In Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen, protesters made deliberate efforts to declare their demonstrations and protests as peaceful. The chant 'Selmia' (peaceful) was widely heard, especially when the lines of demonstrators and those of police came close to each other. This did not, however, stop the police from using force, some of it lethal. In response, demonstrators sometimes resorted to force in self-defense. After having pushed back, however, the demonstrators reverted to nonviolent methods. This was particularly evident when forces supporting Mubarak attacked people in Tahrir Square with rocks, stones, and guns from atop horses and camels using batons and other objects. The demonstrators fought back with stones and with their bare hands. When they succeeded in stopping the onslaught, they quickly reengaged in peaceful protest.

Religion as a Means of Mobilization and Nonviolent Expression. For Muslims, Friday is the day of prayer and rest. Most Muslims, even the least religious ones, often attend the Friday noon prayers held at mosques. Friday prayers during the Arab revolutions became natural centers for sensitizing the masses and for organized marches emerging and converging from all directions. Fridays became a nightmare for Arab regimes under pressure to reform because of the large protests held after services. In anticipation of what Fridays might bring, and hoping to abort demonstrations after prayers, rulers in these countries developed the habit of issuing decrees on Thursdays in response to the demands of the protesters. A joke spread during the revolutions that Arab rulers had 'canceled' Fridays, shortening the week to six days.

Use of Humor. Demonstrators, especially in Egypt, made signs and flyers employing humor to express their frustration and demands. For example, protesters were spotted holding signs that read, 'Leave, Mubarak. I need to go home to take a shower!' and 'Mubarak, What part of GO don't you understand?' After Mubarak's departure, one

sign implored, 'Mubarak, Come back; we were joking with you; this was candid camera!' Use of humor perhaps helped to keep spirits high and created a sense of normalcy during abnormal times.

THE WAY AHEAD

The 2011 Arab revolutions have been sweeping. Egyptians and Tunisians are already reaping the fruits of their newly acquired freedoms and liberties, as evident from fair referendums on constitutions and the formation of political parties. The past cautions, however, that toppling a dictatorial regime and introducing democratic reforms, and even building democratic institutions, are not alone guarantees of development and prosperity. For example, successful struggles for democracy in the Philippines and Bangladesh in 1986 did not bring about widespread improvements in people's lives. Rather, poverty remained rampant and democracy dysfunctional, to say the least, and development failed to progress to the point of meeting the expectations of people at the time of the political upheavals. The Islamic revolution in Iran is an example of a popular uprising that led to the replacement of one autocratic regime with another.

In terms of successful development and institutionalization of effective democracy, South Korea after a popular movement in 1987 might provide hope for Arab revolutionaries today. The Arabs challenging their governments are at a historic crossroad. Many of them are for the first time trying to take charge of their destinies. At the same time, they must reckon with complex and weighty issues, such as the fair distribution of resources, poverty, development, and so on. Their actions and options are also influenced by international dynamics and with the un-settled conflict with Israel that is accompanied by a strong sense of injustice regarding Palestinians' rights. How will new, fairly elected governments in the 'free' Arab world respond to these challenges? It is anyone's guess. This author, based on frequent visits to Egypt during the revolution and shortly after, is optimistic. The spirit of hope, determination, and will to improve life there is unprecedented. Youth, not the old guard, holds the key to progress in the Arab world. One fascinating outcome of the 2011 revolutions is the revival of pan-Arabism. The Arab people see hope for true unification. It is a dream that many feel they can almost touch.