

## Reflections on the Arab Spring: A revolution betrayed?

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The second anniversary of the revolt that toppled Hosni Mubarak in Egypt has been accompanied by extreme polarisation and violence, including alleged gang rapes in Tahrir Square by criminals said to be financed by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In Tunisia, meanwhile, protestors stormed the offices of the ruling Al-Nahda Party following the assassination of a prominent opposition leader and human rights campaigner, Chokri Belaid. These tumultuous events in February 2013 suggest that the 'Arab Spring' might be turning into an 'Arab Winter'. A sobering editorial in the Washington Post recently commented: "Two years ago since protestors toppled Tunisian dictator Zine El Abidine Ali, triggering revolts across the Arab world, euphoria has clearly turned to disappointment. Building Arab democracies with open economies are proving much harder than was, perhaps naively, anticipated."

In the broader Arab region, the waves of protests and social upheavals that drew their impulse and were emboldened by the North African experience were driven by similar structural factors. Most crucial among these were changing demographic dynamics and realities, the failure of authoritarian paternalist regimes, and popular demands for greater political participation and representation. However, the revolutionary promise and transformation potential of the protests and upheavals that shook the Arab world largely failed to provide the pan-regional gravitational

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While the 'Arab Spring' certainly offered a revolutionary moment in the wider politics of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA hereafter), its long-term impact as a catalyst for durable and sustainable change remains unclear if not unpredictable, as the current situation in Egypt under Mohamed Morsi will attest. There are four preliminary considerations which are relevant and which help to explain why the revolutionary promise of the 'Arab Spring' might be fading fast.

Firstly, very rarely do social movements and popular protests lead to successful revolutions. Across the MENA region, there are only four countries, namely, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen that could be said to be experiencing recognisable levels of post-revolutionary transition but these remain ambiguous and uncertain, and are unlikely to deliver the utopian vision that inspired Tahrir Square. And in the twelve other countries, although ruling regimes have faced sustained pressures and systematic challenges from

above and below, they have been able to either suppress or contain these by adjusting to changing vicissitudes in their domestic, regional, and international environments; for how long this situation can be sustained remains to be seen.

In other words, since the onset of the 'Arab Spring', the essence of authoritarian rule has been undergoing redefinition, as ruling regimes seek new ways of simultaneously dealing with the inexorable change that this implies as well as trying to protect an increasingly precarious status quo. A significant aspect of what has been termed authoritarian 'upgrading' has been the ability of ruling regimes to contain any push to broaden the frontiers of political liberalisation, civil society activism, and citizen mobilisation. Even elections have become ceremonial formalities in legitimising the ruling clique and have typically been highly choreographed affairs.

The second consideration concerns the comparatively modest demands that initially emanated from the cauldron of protest and social upheaval. This probably has much to do with the post-Cold War temperament (with globalisation as the chief catalyst) which has seen the decline of popular influences of Marxism and state-driven agendas for revolutions from above. In the contemporary post-colonial era, it would seem that there has been a shift away from Jacobin-style mass political mobilisation designed to engender large-scale social transformation that would otherwise be synonymous with far-reaching revolutionary change. At first, the MENA uprisings have rather been 'self-limiting' in the sense that they focused mainly on calls for individual liberal political emancipation and democratic change rather than pressing for extensive collective economic redistribution, greater political accountability, and social transformation.

However, with the collapse of four autocracies providing the impulse, the critical questions that now arise are as much economic as they are political. Thus, as new ruling elites emerge, how do they go about reorganising the harsh economic and cold political realities in order to meet the unfulfilled needs and aspirations of their burgeoning populations, especially among women and youth?

Quite crucially, authoritarian 'upgrading' has also served an instrumental purpose of transforming the barriers between the public and private realms as well as between the state and the economy, giving rise to the semi-privatisation of powerful fractions of the ruling elite and thus defining the logic of Arab-style crony capitalism. The legacy of this political

engineering and the commercial interests it has embedded and promoted in society are highly problematic for political transitions since the majority of the population have a heightened sense of grievance, alienation, and dissatisfaction. This is especially the case among the young shock troops of the uprisings who have been motivated in large part by their own economic marginality and sense of political disenfranchisement.

The third consideration has to do with the absence of contemporary revolutionary ideologies and beliefs that bring the uprisings together by providing a vision or gestalt of an alternate order. A major part of the 'Arab Spring' iconography had to do with a new-media savvy, socially networked youth, and university-educated middle classes. However, it is debatable whether Facebook and other new technologies can be said to generate ideological frameworks or the kinds of coherent beliefs, values and myths that are capable of sustaining revolutionary change. Satellite television, especially Al-Jazeera and other Arab stations, certainly helped to create the demonstration effect and indeed, opened media spaces that played a part in shaping, informing, and broadening the region-wide public sphere; however, these media outlets did not define a new ideological compass for collective action and citizen empowerment.

Thus, the movements of the 'Arab Spring' were hardly united by a concrete or programmatic agenda for post-regime transformation and change. In the aftermath of the Egyptian elections and even in the current context, we saw that Tahrir Square was not Egypt but then neither was Cairo.

And finally, we have to take account of the coherence of the ancient regime, old ruling elites, and their ability to either suppress or co-opt rising opposition forces in the face of mounting social pressure for genuine reform. While the logic of authoritarian 'upgrading' certainly helped to reinforce an often repressive status quo, it also subtly helped to change the behaviour and attitudes of ruling elites.

In two of the four regime changes, the removals of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt were greatly facilitated by the fracturing of the ruling elite. Very similar to Hussein Tantawi in Cairo, the Tunisian Army Chief of Staff, Rachid Ammar, refused to open fire on the demonstrators. The armed forces in both countries were, therefore, left intact and were strategically placed to influence the form and shape of the respective transitions. In Libya, by contrast, the country's armed forces came up against the heavy and

extended support of NATO which led to rifts in the state's security apparatus and this again was mirrored in the highly fragmented nature of the militias who were attempting to remove Muammar Qaddafi. Then in Yemen, while Ali Abdullah Saleh—the key symbol and figurehead of the ruling regime—was removed after a 33 year despotic tenure, there is on-going and intense political contestation for power among compromised old elites who have dominated the transition phase.

Hence, without key defections and behavioural changes within the higher echelons of the political or military elite or extended external military support, the youthful revolutionaries who have provided the stimulus for change have not been able to shake the social foundations of oligarchic rule and have increasingly become frustrated, disenchanted, and confused.

These considerations provide a prologue to problematic challenges that further impede the substance and dynamics of genuine reform and greater voice and political participation for ordinary citizens.

The first concerns how many of the region's paternalistic and authoritarian regimes have been bolstered by natural resource rents from oil and gas. There are several studies which find a positive relationship between resource dependence and the persistence of authoritarianism.

Arab countries account for 61 per cent of the world's proven oil reserves and for 40 per cent of international trade in crude. Although only 10 of the region's 16 countries are significant oil exporters, the political and economic effects of oil are felt by their oil-importing neighbours through migration opportunities and the remittances which flow from these. (In several countries, these remittances constitute a sizeable portion of GDP: 22.4 per cent in Lebanon; 15.5 per cent in Jordan; 6.6 per cent in Morocco; 5.3 per cent in Tunisia; 5.2 per cent in Yemen; and 4.0 per cent in Egypt.) The prevalence of these 'rentier state' dynamics help to establish a key source of regime legitimacy and stability other than through military, tribal, or religious authority.

An implicit social compact has ensured that citizens enjoy public goods and services without taxation and this depends on large government expenditures on public sector jobs and generous subsidies, especially for basic consumer goods. The breakdown of this social compact and the attendant erosion of the moral

basis of the state-society nexus help to explain why the lack of jobs has been the main grievance of the region's youth since the private sectors have failed to grow or have been paralysed because of the large and bloated public sector and weak business climate. However, rentier regimes have not only provided the fiscal base for large food and fuel subsidies, expansive public sector employment, and housing and cash transfers but have also guaranteed and created conditions for political stability and quiescent and depoliticised citizens. Thus, civil society development has been constrained since business, labour, and religious associations are all subject to government control and regulation, if not outright suppression. It is not surprising, therefore, that MENA countries but particularly oil producers under-perform on standard voice and accountability indicators and that as early as 2008, public opinion surveys showed strong popular support for more democratic governance as a response authoritarian sclerosis.

Other than certain prominent conflicts such as between Israel-Palestine and Iran-Iraq and until the onset of the 'Arab Spring' at least, most countries have escaped significant violence. Stability has thus co-existed with limited liberalisation, with resource rents helping to buttress prevailing state-society interactions. Paradoxically also, there has been enduring stability in the face of a near absence of economic dynamism which has severely constrained entrepreneurship and private sector development. Since resource rents typically accrue to the central government, an executive which controls how rents are used and for what purpose will establish substantial political influence that can be used to further entrench personalist and autocratic one-party regimes. Significant oil wealth provides the types of fiscal revenue streams that obviate the need to impose taxes on the population. Rather oil wealth is redistributed through rents and subsidies. However, the importance of rentier regimes in the MENA region does not mean that democracy activists and revolutionaries for change in the oil rich countries of North Africa and the Persian Gulf will fail; but only to suggest that they will face inordinately more difficult transition challenges than their counterparts in Egypt and Tunisia.

The second problematic challenge concerns the types of regimes which are found in the MENA region. As of 2011 and even in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring', Freedom House has designated only four Arab countries (22 per cent) as partly free and the majority of 13 (72 per cent) as not free. By its controversial standards and criteria of political

rights and civil liberties, only Israel is free (6 per cent). There are a few hybrid regimes such as Lebanon, Kuwait, and Iraq which have some institutions associated with democracy but yet fall way short of full political pluralism, popular rule, and accountability.

Beyond these hybrid regimes which have constitutional systems that incorporate nominal democratic features, there are a variety of personalist and single-party plebiscitary regimes which are essentially authoritarian. Of these there are seven monarchies—namely, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Morocco, Jordan, and Oman. And prior to the ‘Arab Spring’, there were six republics led by long-standing autocrats and strong-men as in Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. The monarchies of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Qatar have been described as ‘dynastic’, meaning that they are ruled by a family rather than an individual; and power is distributed among family members. Except in Bahrain where the position of emir belongs to the first-born child through primogeniture, succession is decided by family consensus and a leader can be removed if he loses the allegiance of his family. In the non-dynastic Arab monarchies of Jordan, Oman, and Morocco, the monarch enjoys absolute power and selects his own successor. Across these monarchies, there are no mechanisms for holding rulers accountable to citizens. For example, in Saudi Arabia citizen participation is limited to elite consultation (*shura*) and elected local councils.

The republican governments are a complex amalgam of personalist, single-party, and military-dominated regimes. Most republics owe their lineages to coups or anti-colonial struggles. The initial post-colonial period was characterised by military intervention in politics but over time (except in Libya) there was greater recourse to single-party dominated systems that varied greatly, particularly with regard to how the dynamics between civilian and military authority were defined.

In Algeria and Syria, civilian governments are highly dependent on military support; in Egypt the military is embedded in the nerves of government; while in Tunisia and Libya, the armed forces were substantially weakened to prevent the possibilities of coups. What the republics have in common is their increasing use of the security infrastructure of repression, fear, and intimidation to deal with political dissent, especially once the gloss of nationalism had started to fade. Institutions were then used as bases for disbursing patronage to loyal regime supporters as power

became increasingly vested and concentrated in the hands of individual leaders as the supreme political and secular authorities.

The third issue area concerns the interface between religion, culture, and politics as an explanatory variable in the Arab world’s lack of democracy. There is an established school of thought which holds that democracy can only flourish if societies adhere to certain cultural values. This culturalist school considers values such as individual responsibility, civic participation, inclusion, and tolerance as prerequisites for democracy while others aver that democracy can only prosper if elites and masses believe it to be the most legitimate form of government. In trying to explain the democracy deficit in the Middle East, adherents of this culturalist persuasion argue that there are elements of Muslim and Arab traditions that are anathema to the values required for democracy and instead, these traditions facilitate authoritarian rule and practice.

Another culturalist strand argues that the region’s democratic deficit can be explained by the unquestioning acceptance of authority in Islam. The patrimonial tribal origins of modern Arab societies are said to have fostered submission to authority and reduced any impulses toward democratisation. Beginning in the 9th century, Muslim views of political authority took a ‘quietist’ approach. There was a fear of civil war and foreign conquest and Muslim scholars argued that believers should support a leader provided he was a Muslim and could protect society against civil disorder (*fitna*). While proponents of this Islam-centric explanation do concede that the history of Islam is filled with groups who have justified their struggle against tyranny on religious grounds, they insist that the ‘quietist’ narrative has remained dominant since it continues to be preached by modern Muslim clerics (*ulama*). This, in part, accounts for the de-politicisation of citizens.

This culturalist disposition, however, suffers under the weight of evidence in the contemporary setting. While Islam will always be a major force in Arab politics and while elections show strong public support for political Islam, recent opinion surveys suggest that Arabs strongly support democracy. Indeed, with the onset of the ‘Arab Spring’, Islamist parties have begun to make the case that they are the only credible democratic alternatives to authoritarian power-holders. Furthermore, the logic of the current Islamist momentum does not dictate that religious precepts will necessarily dominate the Arab discourse. Tensions between secularists and Islamists will persist

in the struggle to establish the ascendance of their respective democratic credentials in society and this has become the crucible in shaping the normative bases of popular legitimacy and citizens' demands. Constitutions and new frameworks for governance will have to carefully navigate this tension between liberal freedoms and the imperatives of a civic culture and conservative rules and the Islamisation of social life. Obviously, different Arab countries display different levels and degrees of religiosity and this will certainly exercise a determining influence on the role which dominant Islam and indeed, other religions will play in Arab transitions and how these will be accommodated, especially among Christian and Jewish minorities. The extent to which the Sunni and Shia divide has now been instrumentalised in Arab politics, increasingly in violent expressions, will also have to be taken into account. However, it must be emphasised that a strong role for religion and religious life is not necessarily an impediment to the consolidation of a democratic order. In short, cultural and religious determinism must be rejected as a myth since no religion or belief system is more favourable than another when it comes to a peaceful transition to democracy; and nor does genuine democratisation imply the triumph of secularism.

And finally, there is the external dimension and the absolute importance of the Arab world's oil production in the global economy. Historically, the Soviet Union played a major role in buttressing fragile Arab regimes but increasingly the United States and Europe have provided repressive oil regimes with critical economic support, military assistance and international legitimacy. Non-oil economies such as Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have also come to depend on this kind of foreign assistance. Thus, the protection of oil pipelines and shipping lanes that are a critical part of the production chain and global trade infrastructure is a strategic priority for the world's major economic powers, especially the United States. The external dimension is further complicated by America's strategic support of Israel.

In short, the post-war history of developed countries' engagement has shown no overt condoning or explicit condemnation of the repressive actions of the MENA region's autocrats. While there has been some nominal foreign assistance in support of democracy and governance to largely ineffective NGOs, overall the foreign policies of the main external players particularly the United States, the European Union (EU), and Russia, have bolstered the stability of existing regimes. This kind of support, regardless of regime excesses, has been referred to a 'strategic

rents' because of the skewed distribution of aid to strategically important countries. The purpose of foreign policy has turned more on building constructive alliances with such countries and their regimes so as to ensure that they stay in power, mostly by way of military assistance. This includes equipment acquisition, training, and access to sophisticated weaponry and surveillance technologies all of which have been instrumental in establishing large intelligence and security systems which are keys to sustaining regime loyalty and legitimacy.

Given these dynamics and the history of external interaction with the region, initially the major external actors like the United States and the EU were totally surprised by the 'Arab Spring'. The conventional foreign policy wisdom of major powers has now been challenged on all fronts, especially with regard to the sustainability of 'strategic rents' as well as the efficacy of current security doctrines and support for Israel. The future role of foreign powers in the 'Arab Spring' is thus highly uncertain since there are distinct limits to external influences on transition processes underway; the cases of Egypt, Syria, Libya, and Tunisia are eloquent testimony to this. Indeed, the history of foreign engagement in the region shows no discernible impact on democratisation or genuine political reform.

In conclusion and given what is occurring in Egypt and Tunisia, successful democratisation and revolutionary change can be expected to follow a very different trajectory in the Arab world because of its distinctive paternalistic and authoritarian regimes, the role of Islam in politics, the importance of oil in some of the region's economies, strategic re-assessments by major external actors, and an 'over-determined' security apparatus that is often at the centre of the state. As a parting message, the spirit of Karl Marx can be invoked for what he famously wrote in the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte since it has profound relevance as well as great normative implications for the Middle East and North Africa. Thus Marx wrote: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past".

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