A New Middle East?

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What Has Changed

Like most momentous phenomena in history, the wave of uprisings against authoritarian Arab governments, commonly referred to as the Arab spring, seems easy to analyze – in retrospect. As soon as the first anti-regime demonstrators took to the streets of the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in late December 2010, Middle East experts began to explain how the self-immolation of an obscure fruit peddler was not the cause of anything but simply the catalyst of a conflagration whose elements had been in place for a long time. Analysts described how the corrupt and increasingly sclerotic dictatorship of Zein al-Abdin Bin Ali in Tunisia had become increasingly disconnected from the reality of an increasingly young population increasingly alienated by the regime's failure to provide it with jobs or any kind of share in whatever economic development was taking place or to treat it with any measure of respect. They also described how the regime had lost its monopoly over information because of the invasion of uncontrolled media like al-Jazeera and internet-based social networks, and how these channels made members of the "youth bulge" not only more aware that their outrage at loss of opportunity and hope was shared by others but also more confident that they could effectively coordinate with others. They then described how these same media were also used to communicate the nature and extent of the uprising to the outside world, prompting foreign partners and benefactors to withdraw their support from incumbent regimes. Finally, they described how this combination of internal and external factors led important political formations, especially

the armed forces, to abandon the dictator and force him to abandon the palace and scurry off to exile in Saudi Arabia, thereby allowing the people to claim their long denied dignity and freedom, to which they were entitled and of which they had been so long deprived.

In the case of Tunisia, this was a fairly compelling post factum narrative that made what happened seem altogether logical, if not inevitable. Moreover, it included enough elements common to other Middle Eastern contexts to suggest that Tunisians, having broken through the "barrier of fear" to which political quiescence in the region had been attributed, would make their country a catalyst of analogous developments elsewhere. In other words, observers who admitted to having been surprised by the popular overthrow of a dictator in Tunisia began to insist that it would not be a surprise if similar events occurred elsewhere.

That conviction, of course, received a tremendous stimulus in the following weeks when Egypt, which many had initially insisted was not Tunisia, underwent a similar transformation that left its pharaonic ruler, Husni Mubarak, in an even more precarious position than Bin Ali. At the same time and shortly thereafter, overt opposition erupted across the region from Morocco in the west to Bahrain and Oman in the east, and though the intensity of the protests varied, the extent of the phenomenon seemed to confirm the belief that these were not isolated incidents but rather part of a systemic upheaval – the result of a demonstration effect. The logic underlying that belief was that 2011 was the Middle East's version of 1789 or 1848 or 1968 or 1979 or 1989, and that authoritarian rulers would soon be ousted almost everywhere in the tidal wave of democratization that had swept over southern and eastern Europe, Latin America, East Asia, and even much of Africa in preceding decades but that had, for a variety of reasons, bypassed the Middle East – until now. In short, rather than continuing as history's foster child, the region had suddenly caught up and was about to become the new Middle East.

The Middle East after the outbreak of mass protests against authoritarian regimes is undeniably new and different. The novelty does not lie in mass protests or the mobilization of the so-called "Arab street." There is, in fact, a long local history of large scale mass movements and protests. In some cases, they were incited or orchestrated by the regimes

themselves and directed against foreign adversaries. In some cases, as in labor demonstrations, they involved civil protests focused on narrowly defined economic aims. In some cases, they involved sectarian, ethnic, or national groups contesting the power or policies of governments ostensibly favoring the interests of other sectarian, ethnic, or national groups. In some cases, they were ideological protests – nationalist or religious – using mass demonstrations and/or terrorism. But since 1952, no country in the region, apart from Iran, has ever before witnessed mass upheavals resulting in the ouster of entrenched regimes. (Even in 1952, King Farouk of Egypt was deposed by a military coup d'état, not by the popular demonstrations that had intermittently erupted for several years before the Free Officers arrested the King, escorted him to his yacht, and politely sent him off to exile in Rome.) Thus, the wave of protests that began to wash over the region in late 2010 is clear evidence that something momentous has occurred. Perhaps most significantly, public opinion can no longer be ignored or stifled by repressive means, even in the most ruthless of the so-called "national security states," and those who observe, deal with, or live in the Middle East can no longer assume that stasis is tantamount to stability.

Who is at Risk?

Beyond this basic observation, however, little else is clear. Many of the initial generalizations drawn from the experiences of Tunisia and Egypt were quickly refuted by subsequent developments. The first of these was that the most serious threat was to "moderate" or status quo regimes, ostensibly because they had aroused the particular ire of the masses with their "pro-American" or "pro-Israel" policies. It is not clear why this reasoning should ever have had any resonance, given that the Arab spring had been preceded in 2009 by an equally widespread and vigorous protest movement that shook but ultimately failed to overthrow the Iranian regime, which only the most inveterate conspiracy theorists could suspect of any pro-American or pro-Israel proclivities. Perhaps the unspoken assumption, therefore, was that the so-called moderates were relatively soft dictatorships compared with their more brutal counterparts in the "resistance" camp.

Here too, however, observers might have disabused themselves of the notion of the pro-Western fixation if they had paid closer attention to the self-described motivations of the crowds that came out to demand the departure of the regimes in Tunis and Cairo; these had very little to do with America or Israel. For a brief time, some were apparently more impressed by the logic of President Bashar al-Asad, who pronounced Syria, i.e., Asad, immune to this sort of opposition protest because of Syria's posture of resistance.[1] This analysis was superficially vindicated when the disturbances intensified or spread to places like Yemen, where President Ali Abdullah Saleh had proclaimed himself a partner in the American struggle against terrorism, to Bahrain, home base of the US Fifth Fleet, and even, though far less vigorously, to Jordan and Oman. However, a crack in the logic appeared when anti-regime protests briefly reemerged in Iran and when a large scale revolt erupted in Libya, whose leader, Muammar Qaddafi, had once figured prominently as one of the "defiant ones" in the Middle East. Although, Qaddafi had more recently bought himself into the West's good graces, he has remained at best an erratic figure. The logic then collapsed completely when it suddenly became clear (probably to his genuine astonishment) that Asad, the Syrian pillar of resistance, benefactor of Hamas and Hizbollah, and main strategic collaborator of Iran in the Arab world, was no less reviled by his own people than were Mubarak and Bin Ali – and for essentially the same reasons.

Game Over?

The second generalization that circumstances soon refuted was that the tide of history was running against authoritarian rulers, and that once the barrier of fear was breached and the people dared to express their wrath, the rulers were doomed to be swept away. This too seemed an overly hasty extrapolation from the experiences of Tunisia and Egypt. Of course in the longer perspective of history, no governing system, and certainly no individual, is eternal. The most seemingly entrenched regime can crumble even in the absence of overt large scale domestic opposition. Alternatively, it can overcome such opposition but then begin to evolve in ways that make it almost unrecognizable. The former process describes the Soviet

Union; the latter may capture the post-1989 history of Communist China. In this sense, all rulers live on borrowed time.

But historical perspective provides little guidance to political analysts and journalists operating within a different timeframe. In their timeframe, the fact that Bin Ali and Mubarak quickly preferred flight to fight does not necessarily mean that the fate of Asad, Saleh, and others is similarly sealed. For example, the Bahraini monarchy in 2011, like the Islamic Republic in Iran in 2009, appears thus far to have weathered the challenge (just as Asad's father, Hafez, weathered the challenge to him in 1982). Qaddafi in fact was overthrown, but only following Western military intervention, and in mid 2011 it was unclear whether Saleh would return from medical treatment in Saudi Arabia to resume the fight in Yemen. Indeed, while the examples of Tunisia and Egypt may have inspired people in other countries to press harder against their own rulers, the post-resignation fates of Bin Ali and Mubarak may have inspired rulers in other countries to resist even more fiercely. In any case, on this issue too there is no preordained outcome.

Outside Agitators?

A related question has to do with the role of outsiders in influencing the outcome of domestic power struggles. As the protests began to gather momentum in Tunisia, it was revealed that the French Foreign Minister had enjoyed a cozy relationship with Bin Ali's family and that France had even offered assistance to Tunisian security forces to deal more effectively with the unrest. That revived a frenzied debate in the West over the extent to which outsiders can and should be supportive of one party or another in domestic power struggles. When the wave of opposition spread to Egypt and Bahrain – countries with which the United States has especially close ties – the American public was treated to an entertaining but inconclusive argument about whether more credit for the eruption of democratic consciousness in the Middle East should be attributed to George W. Bush's advocacy of democratization or to Barack Obama's policy of engagement. Bush's defenders gleefully recalled Obama's passivity during the "Iranian spring" of 2009, when some anti-regime protesters chastised the American

President with placards proclaiming "Obama, you're either with us or against us."[2]

Of course, both sides in the argument assumed implicitly that American input was critical in invigorating or debilitating the opposition movements and the regime responses. Bahraini demonstrators, for example, soon echoed their Iranian counterparts by asking, "Where are the Americans, where are the Americans, why are they allowing this?"[3] Yet whatever the validity of that assumption, it is clear that when the US administration, after prolonged wavering, came down on the side of those Egyptians demanding Mubarak's departure, the close, almost organic tie between the US and the Egyptian military establishment was a factor in the High Command's decision to advise Mubarak that the time had come to leave. But criticism of that wavering by Americans instinctively sympathetic to any movement that looks democratic and calls itself democratic prompted Obama to act quite differently in the case of Libya and to respond positively to French urgings – perhaps grounded in the French case in a need to atone for inaction in Tunisia – to intervene militarily on the side of the anti-Qaddafi rebels. In other words, American and others preferred the Libyan devil they don't know to the Libyan devil they do know.

Of course, not every situation in the region resembled Egypt, Tunisia, or Libya; most were even more complex. The Western powers did not always have a clear idea of where their interests lay, which probably explains why, in the case of Syria, they effectively preferred the devil they do know to the devil they don't know. And even when they clearly sympathized with the opposition movements, they could not bring effective influence to bear because they lacked leverage with a critical power broker like the army, or were unwilling to activate their own military power in order to tilt the internal balance of power. Thus, regimes under threat could persuade themselves that the West lacked the capacity or resolve to intervene, and even if they were convinced that political isolation and effective economic and/or legal sanctions would be imposed, if they were fighting for their political and perhaps physical existence and forced to choose between losing now and perhaps losing later, they would quite reasonably opt for the latter.

Moreover, the West was not alone in the region. Others also acted on interests or preferences that did not always coincide with those of the United States and its allies. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, for example, intervened militarily to help suppress the largely Shiite-supported uprising against the regime in Bahrain. According to most available information, this occurred without any prior coordination or agreement with the United States (which was in any event resented by the Saudis for having abandoned its longstanding Egyptian ally with indecent haste). Conversely, there were persistent accusations that Iran had encouraged and assisted the largely-Shiite opposition movement in Bahrain and unverifiable reports that Iran was providing various sorts of technical and logistical support to the Syrian regime in its struggle to repress the challenge to its control.

Both regime and opposition forces had a vested interest in stressing the alleged interference of outsiders in favor of their domestic adversaries. Ali Abdullah Saleh raised (but later retracted) the charge that the entire Yemeni opposition was controlled in a secret war room in Tel Aviv, and the Asad regime went even further with its claim that there was no real Syrian opposition at all, only terrorists, religious extremists, and criminals acting as agents of foreign powers. Though such charges can be dismissed as self-serving propaganda, there is documented evidence of outside involvement in many of the uprisings in the region. In a few specific cases, especially Bahrain and Libya, it has even made a significant difference in the way events have unfolded, and both Middle Easterners and outsiders continue to debate what outsiders should or shouldn't do. Nevertheless, with the possible exception of Bahrain and Libya, there is little apart from wishful thinking to sustain the grandiose generalization that foreign, especially Western, and especially American, policy is the critical factor in determining the outcome of the struggles for the future of the Middle East.

The End of History?

Finally, and perhaps most critically, there is the Middle Eastern chapter of the "End of History." Trying to chart the future course of the Middle East following the Arab spring is tantamount to using a GPS navigation system without functioning satellites. Even if one shares the rather dubious

assumption that authoritarian rulers are doomed and will eventually disappear, there is no certainty at all about how the situation will develop after they leave. The hope inspired by the scenes of spontaneous mass demands for freedom in Tunisia and Egypt was that societies that throw off authoritarian regimes have embarked on a path that leads ineluctably to democracy. That hope, shared by liberals and neoconservatives in the West, certainly animated many of the protesters themselves. Of course, what drove them to take to the streets and brave the response of the regimes' security agencies was not just a thirst for freedom. Many acknowledged that the most urgent factors were the same economic grievances and resentment of corruption that had produced widespread demonstrations before, for example, the 1977 bread riots in Egypt, but had failed to overturn the political order.

In any case, the motives of the demonstrators are not necessarily conclusive indicators of where the uprisings may go, and the Arab uprisings (like many others elsewhere), even if made in the name of liberalism and democracy, may unleash profoundly illiberal and undemocratic forces. Indeed, hijacked revolutions are hardly aberrations. The revolution launched in France in 1789 in the name of liberty, equality, and fraternity served as a major case study for Crane Brinton's *The Anatomy of Revolution*, which likened revolutions to the stages of fever passing through a body.[4] For over a hundred and fifty years, the fever carried France through a reign of terror, aggressive imperialism, monarchical restoration, imperial restoration, and a series of chronically unstable republics challenged by various reactionary nationalists, monarchists, clericalists, and fascists as well as Communists, before it finally settled into something approaching stable democracy. And even that unhappy history may be unduly optimistic in the sense that it, like the Russian Revolution, at least seems to have something approximating a happy ending. In fact, the telos of historical transformations, happy or otherwise, seems predetermined only in retrospect, and the path toward any endpoint is rarely smooth.

It is therefore impossible to predict with any confidence that the Arab spring has (or has not) set the Arab world on a course to democracy. Indeed, there is not even a reliable framework within which the issue of democratization can be analyzed, notwithstanding the antiquity of the

problem and the intellectual capital invested in it. However, a revolution inspired more by the desire to oust the regime *qua* regime rather than by a fight to transfer power from one ethnic, confessional, or tribal group to another is more likely to focus on the individual rights at the heart of liberal democracy than on the prerogatives of collectivities, which often undermine liberal democratic discourse. This kind of focus is, by definition, more likely to be found in relatively homogenous societies. Beyond that, there are elements of civil society that appear empirically or at least intuitively correlated with the development of democracy (as distinct from mob rule or the tyranny of the majority). These include: a developing middle class not dependent on state favors, avoidance of the most egregiously unequal/dishonest distribution of economic benefits, tolerance of pluralism in thought and practice, low levels of religiosity (or at least, absence of established religion), and rule of law (positive, not divine). It also helps if there are powerful or charismatic personalities like Mikhail Gorbachev, Mustafa Kemal, Lech Walensa, Vaclav Pavel, Deng Tsao-ping, and Nelson Mandela capable of pushing modernization/reform from above or below. Some of these elements are absent in all Arab societies; nearly all are missing in some Arab societies.

As a result, even those that have already succeeded in ousting authoritarian rulers are exhibiting tendencies that raise genuine concerns about the prospects for democracy. For example, after the ouster of Bin Ali, Tunisia would seem to be favorably placed to move toward democratization. By regional standards, it ranks very high in terms of modernization and secularization indices, with greater literacy rates, openness to the outside world, and gender equality than most neighboring states. It is also a homogeneous society and has a small, professional army not suspected of harboring any political ambitions of its own. It was experiencing positive economic growth in the years before the Jasmine Revolution, marred mainly by the fact that a disproportionate share of the benefits was expropriated by a kleptocratic dictatorship. Notwithstanding this generally favorable starting point, however, many Tunisians are skeptical about the constant protestations of Rachid Ghannouchi, the leader of an-Nahda, that his movement is fully committed to democracy, and they are concerned that the political space created by the ouster of Bin Ali will be exploited by

Islamists to move the country along a retrograde path. In fact, one of the first major public events in Tunis following Bin Ali's departure was a mass march warning against any move to curtail the rights and status women had achieved under the authoritarian rule of Bin Ali and his legendary predecessor, Habib Bourguiba. However overstated these anxieties might appear to be, they reflect a real concern of some Tunisians about the constancy of their country's evolution into modern democracy.

In Egypt, the prospects are more daunting. Unlike its Tunisian counterpart, the Egyptian military, a formidable power behind every Egyptian government since 1952, has retained executive authority and shows no inclination to cede it, at least until after the presidential elections scheduled for 2012. True, the army appears genuinely desirous of returning to the barracks and has exhibited some responsiveness to the public mood, by agreeing, for example, to try and imprison high officials of the former regime. More generally, it has not overtly opposed the broadening of the political space. That space, however, is apparently being filled most quickly and effectively not by those who played the most prominent role in the occupation of Tahrir Square that led to the downfall of Mubarak, but by other political personalities and forces whose commitment to democracy may be suspect.

This may simply mean that those who demand freedom for themselves do not necessarily also want it for everyone else. But as the realignment of politics in Egypt plays out, it will be accompanied by a deteriorating economic situation resulting from the disruption of tourism and worker remittances (especially from Libya) and the decline in investor confidence. Since the outbreak of the demonstrations, inflation (especially of food prices) has accelerated, market valuations have declined by about 25 percent, and capital flight (estimated at one third of Egypt's foreign exchange reserves, i.e., about $30 billion) has afflicted the economy.[5] As transitional governments struggle to satisfy more assertive demands by workers and others with populist promises and diminishing resources, the appeal of those promising to restore stability with a strong hand may well grow.

Second, there appear to be greater prospects for sectarian backsliding. Egypt had never moved as far along the path of modernization and

secularization as did Tunisia, which in any event is a more homogenous society. In fact, Egypt was the birthplace of the Muslim Brotherhood and though it, along with its more violent jihadist offshoots, was repressed and contained by successive Egyptian governments, it continued to operate even under adverse conditions. With the relaxation of constraints on their activities, Islamists are filling more of the political space even as other political forces find it exceedingly difficult to organize in advance of the struggle for Egypt's future. So too, the Salafists among them are intensifying the incitement and violence that they waged against Egyptian Copts with some degree of impunity even under the old regime.

Politics and Horticulture

None of this augurs well for a peaceful transition to the liberal democracy espoused by the Arab spring's most prominent spokesmen, at least in the foreign media. Of course, there is nothing that categorically precludes that outcome. But if history is any guide, even if liberal democracy does eventually emerge, the path of its evolution will be long and costly, with many digressions and reversals along the way.

Despite the commonalities of the struggles to impose reform or submission on authoritarian rulers in the Arab world, all politics are ultimately local, and the specificities of each case are so great that there may be no real basis at all for generalizations about the Arab spring. Still, there is some regional dynamic at work, at least in the sense that events in one part of that world resonate strongly in others. The adoption of similar slogans by demonstrators from Rabat to Manama is testimony to that, and the pervasiveness of the phenomenon clearly indicates that the frozen Arab politics of recent decades have been shattered by the Jasmine and Lotus Revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. But horticultural metaphors for political transformations are not very instructive. Flowers have relatively predictable life cycles; revolutions do not. So while a new and different Middle East is obviously emerging, there is as yet no assurance that it will also be freer, more prosperous, more tolerant, more egalitarian, or more pacific than the old Middle East. In short, new and different may also prove to be better. But any prediction of such an outcome is grounded more in

hope than in solid evidence, and hope cannot long survive if spring fails to turn into summer.

Notes

1 "Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011.
2 Michael Rubin, "Hearing Obama in Tehran," *New York Daily News*, February 16, 2011.
3 Michael Slackman, "The Proxy Battle in Bahrain," *New York Times*, March 21, 2011.
4 Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, revised and expanded edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), p. 16.
5 Niall Ferguson, "The Revolution Blows Up," *Newsweek*, June 25, 2011.