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In North African Unrest,
Competing Visions of a Post-Arab Spring Order
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With the apparent defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS), the approaching end to the civil war in Syria, and sovereignty returning to Iraq, the Middle East has appeared to settle into a relative, if tense, calm. Across North Africa, however, where the upheavals began eight years ago, recent weeks have witnessed a growing unrest reminiscent of the Arab Spring's early days. Though ostensibly unrelated, the removal of longtime autocrats in Algeria and Sudan, and an emerging strongman's bid for hegemony in Libya, collectively point to competing visions for a post-Arab Spring order whose fate remains uncertain.

On April 2, 2019, Algeria's 82-year old and ailing President, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, submitted his resignation in a stunning victory for a protest movement that had erupted six weeks prior in opposition to Bouteflika's expected fifth term. Two days later, Khalifa Heftar, the leader of a dominant grouping of militias in eastern Libya, launched a military offensive aimed at wresting control of the capital city, Tripoli, from an internationally-recognized government seated there since 2016. Then on April 11, Sudanese Defense Minister Awad Ibn Auf announced that the military had removed the country's President of nearly thirty years, Omar al-Bashir, and would be overseeing a two-year transition. The Algerian, Libyan, and Sudanese trajectories of the last eight years have differed considerably, reflecting the singular features of each country's contemporary history. Still, an assessment of the current dramas unfolding in these neighboring countries is useful insofar as the discernible similarities and differences therein reflect competing visions for a post-Arab Spring order whose fate remains very much undecided.

Proximate Triggers

Bouteflika's swift removal, Heftar's bold announcement, and the once unimaginable exit of a fixture like Bashir caught observers by surprise, but the proximate causes of all three developments were evident enough.

In Algeria, a leaderless protest movement emerged in late February as it became increasingly clear that Bouteflika would present his candidacy for a fifth five-year term, despite having suffered a stroke in 2013 and largely disappearing from public view thereafter. Until the current election cycle, Bouteflika himself had remained popular,

partly for his involvement in the anti-colonial struggle against the French in the 1950s and partly for his role in steering the country out of a devastating civil war upon taking office in 1999. His tenure had also coincided with a period of steady economic growth and hefty state spending, facilitated by nearly 15 years of rising oil prices – a boon for a state whose economy continued to revolve around the export of hydrocarbons. Traumatic memories of the civil war, combined with the state’s reliance on its deep coffers to preempt unrest, helped explain why Algeria escaped the 2011 tumult largely unscathed. But an increasingly youthful population (over 60 percent of the country’s 42 million are under the age of 30) and the 2014 plunge in oil prices weakened those deterrents, and the prospect of a wheelchair-bound, mute leader retaining power beyond 2019 proved the final straw for hundreds of thousands of Algerians who took to the streets in February and March, demanding Bouteflika withdraw his candidacy.

Caught off guard by the scale of the protests, the regime initially offered a series of concessions, including a promise that Bouteflika would not run again, a transitional process to amend the constitution and prepare for new elections, and two cabinet reshuffles. On March 26, Army Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah even went so far as to recommend invoking Article 102 of the constitution, which outlines a procedure for declaring the presidency vacant. But with each passing week, the protestors’ demands grew more extensive, and so the proposed concessions grew less satisfactory. The April 2 announcement of Bouteflika’s resignation precipitated an exit many Algerians had long since known was coming, in one form or another.

Likewise, Heftar’s desire to extend control over all of Libya has been well-documented over the last few years. Since the country emerged from a brief civil war between two broad coalitions of rival militias in 2015, Heftar had steadily gained prominence as the leader of the Libyan National Army, a grouping of militias – including some composed entirely of Salafists – based in the eastern half of the country and nominally tied to the House of Representatives in Tobruk, one of Libya’s two rival governments. In his bid for hegemony, Heftar benefited from the assistance of various foreign actors, including Russia, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and more recently, France and Saudi Arabia – all despite a United Nations arms embargo limiting the entry of weapons. (In any case, post-Ghaddafi Libya is awash in them.) But Heftar’s rise came alongside a UN-brokered agreement that in late 2015 created an internationally-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli. The GNA has struggled to assert its control and thus legitimacy beyond the capital, relying on alliances with various militias in the western part of the country.

Meanwhile, a UN-sponsored negotiation process in place since 2012 has valiantly tried but repeatedly failed to unify the country’s political factions. In the latest iteration of

proposals, a national conference aimed at laying the groundwork for elections was scheduled for April 14-16. Indeed, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres was in Tripoli to prepare for the conference on the very day Hefar announced his troops would be taking the capital. The timing may have reflected a posturing aimed at extracting more from the conference, which UN officials have now postponed. In recent weeks Hefar's forces swept through the (largely unpopulated) southern part of the country and took control of key oil installations, so it is also possible he felt sufficiently emboldened by those gains to make a push for Tripoli. To the extent Algeria had encouraged talks between the rival Libyan factions and urged Hefar to refrain from launching attacks, its distraction with internal matters may have also convinced Hefar there was an opportunity. Whatever the rationale behind the timing of Hefar's move, the operation was long predicted, and the escalation has already led to over 120 deaths in and around the capital.

In Sudan, Bashir's dismissal followed four months of protests that initially broke out over the rising cost of bread but were widely seen to reflect the broader worsening economic conditions facing Sudan's population of 42 million – of whom roughly 60 percent are under the age of 24 – since the secession of South Sudan in 2011 removed three-quarters of the oil fields Sudan had relied on for income. Rising inflation and a severe cash shortage prompted previous rounds of protests in 2013 and again in 2016, provoking a harsh response by the regime's security apparatuses and resulting in several hundred deaths. This time too, the regime did not hesitate to use force against the demonstrators, who nonetheless managed to grow into the hundreds of thousands and transform what had begun as a protest focused on economic grievances into a mobilization demanding political change. In the face of such a mobilization, the country's top military brass – many of whom comprised Bashir's inner circle – evidently concluded they could no longer maintain a firm grip on the situation with Bashir at the helm.

Underlying Causes and Competing Visions

Common to the Algerian, Libyan, and Sudanese plotlines is a more fundamental struggle over the social contract underpinning the relationship between these countries' rulers and citizenry. For decades the basic bargain of that relationship saw the state providing services, largely thanks to income derived from oil and gas sales, in exchange for social acquiescence to a broadly repressive political system. These bargains broke down over the last decade, but they were not easily replaced, leaving in their wake a convergence of increasingly youthful populations, high unemployment, worsening poverty, mushrooming informal economies, and state institutions that in many cases are brittle or entirely absent – conditions familiar to most Arab states in the post-Spring landscape. The protest movements in Algeria and Sudan on the one hand, and Libya's aspiring strongman on the other, offer competing visions for the trajectory of this deeper struggle. In the Algerian

and Sudanese formulas, a popular uprising is pushing for political liberalization. In the Libyan model, a military figure is seeking to achieve dominance and impose an order very likely to resemble the country's pre-2011 state.

All three face considerable obstacles. The Algerian masses have clearly articulated their demand to bring down the corrupt web of political and economic interests governing their country, but it is not at all clear that the military – which remains a dominant, if relatively popular, force – intends to allow for the kind of wholesale transformation the protestors seek. Gaid Salah himself now features among the names protestors are insisting should depart the scene, and although presidential elections have been set for July 4, it is far from certain a credible opposition figure can emerge to galvanize those pushing for change. In Sudan, Bashir's dismissal was warmly received by the protestors, but the 10-member military council appointed to manage the country's transition could end up entrenching its rule rather than enabling steps toward a deeper reform of the system. For his part, Hefatar may enjoy the backing of key international actors, but he faces fierce resistance among a sizable portion of the Libyan population, and it is questionable whether his forces are sufficiently trained and equipped to subdue the capital. The coming weeks will be decisive for all three North African arenas, but the broader struggle over the contours of a post-Arab Spring order is far from over.