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From Tunis to Manama: The Dynamics at Play in the Arab Uprisings

What are the roots of rebellion in the countries currently facing transition and/or unrest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)? What are the causal and resultant, internal and external, historical and present-day factors at play in social movement-building and democratic transition in the MENA contexts?

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- The first question we should ask is: Is this really an Arab spring?
- The story and nature of the revolution is not a simple one – it is not simply a “youth movement”, for example – and we have to look at the region’s and each country’s history to understand the dynamics at play.
- The Arab region has been a hotbed of political instability and conflict. A sense of insecurity prevails among its citizens, and a deep sense of injustice, particularly for the Palestinians in the West Bank. This sense of injustice and oppression has been further exacerbated by widespread economic insecurity.
- Note also that the region has also seen the flow of millions of refugees across its borders for decades.
- There was a dominant perception in the region that the world had a ‘different’ view of the Middle East, that it did not expect Middle Eastern citizens and societies to fight for democracy and human rights.
- The region has failed to find political responses that can give region sense of pride to its people and foster change. Arab nationalism as promoted by Former Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and the Arab Baath Party has not been able to offer a viable alternative to existing power structures. Leftist movements have also failed to win over majority support.
- Democracy now offers a new chance. However, in the past George Bush’s Middle East policy of “showing the Arabs how to do democracy” did not find support, with the invasion of Iraq being highly unpopular amongst the people in the region.
- There is now hope in the growing civil society movement in the region; those calling for a fairly Western style of democracy, with an emphasis on women’s rights and minority rights among other issues, in the past never had enough power to become political and were squashed effectively in many countries.
- The average citizen is politically disenfranchised at every level, whether under the Gulf monarchies or the Arab republics, such as Syria. There is no room for participation: If you try

to object, the result is often arbitrary detention and severe human rights violations. The space for public objection to state policy is extremely limited.

- There has been a positive development of a growing number of open spaces in the last 15 years, with a growing civil society in Egypt, Jordan, Palestine and Morocco. However, none of the laws changed and the environment stayed unfavourable because the style of rule did not change. People were allowed to speak out to some degree as long as it had no real impact.
- Development policies failed too at most levels; policies focused on macro- instead of micro-development. They often ignored regional disparities and rural divides. Often the level of general health is declining even when the GDP is rising.
- The financial crises of 2001 and 2008 also had their impact on the region, with rising food prices which became hard to afford for those with low incomes. This has grave consequences for a country like Egypt, where half of the population lives on two dollars a day or less.
- Youth unemployment adds to insecurity – often 20-29% and higher for university graduates.
- Corruption is endemic in the region. Even in countries with natural resources, profit often stays in the hands small elites who are tied to the international financial elites. Thus the money earned is not invested to create jobs and productivity.
- These policies, beneficial for a few and harmful for the majority, were fully supported and encouraged by the global economy; hence, the Arab revolutions should also be seen as revolutions against a neoliberalism which prevented their societies from prospering.
- Examples:
 - Tunisia was held up as a positive example of economic growth in the region, with 7-8% of GDP growth; but at the same time, unemployment was increasing.
 - Egypt was named “Top Performer in Doing Business 2008” by the World Bank, despite corruption, nepotism and unemployment.
 - A former foreign minister was named leading minister of a developing country; just a few months after, he was sentenced to 30 years in prison for corruption.
- The uprisings were primarily about dignity, a sense of self, and about having a say; it started with the young people, even though it was not solely a youth movement. It is also questionable whether it was actually a “facebook revolution”, as many in Egypt do not have access to the internet.
- In Tunisia and Egypt, the revolutions were supported by a broad part of the society, the most organised of which were the Islamic movements.
- We have to remember that every revolution was different – it was not just one “Arab spring”
 - Libya different gone through an armed conflict (and is still doing so).
 - Yemen is now more fragmented than ever before; Abdullah Saleh is removed from power, but is still powerful and controls much of the economy and army. Yemen’s future is uncertain.
 - In Syria, we are looking at a protracted conflict for the next 3-4 years.
 - In the Gulf, signs are not encouraging in terms of increasing democratic and human rights standards.
- It is easier to bring down a bad regime than to create a proper system of government. The question is, what do we build now? How do we build?

- Attention should be paid to the rising power of the Islamist movements. They do deserve a position in the process of building new governments (as many other options have failed) and they are an ascending force to be reckoned with.
- Women played a very important role in the revolts as part of the youth movement and of the mass demonstrations in Egypt. However, women are now under serious threat to lose the few rights they had before the revolutions.
- Pay attention to the following:
 - “Easy” ideas about capacity building etc. need to be combined with institutional reform.
 - Bodies to implement policy and rights need to be set up. [We should not just talk about human rights, but focus on implementation.]
 - Focusing on women’s rights is crucial.
 - There is a need for policy research.

Discussion

Q: You talked about “economics of desperation”. If so many young people are out of work, where do the few dollars come from that people live off per day?

- They are earned through the informal economy, e.g. selling goods in the streets or begging (which is a recent phenomenon in Lebanon and Palestine).
- Remittances often constitute a big part of the GDP.

Comment: The problem of Tunisia’s economy is a lack of structural choices. Many areas lack infrastructure, and there is a big debate about territorial management vs centralisation. The future of the revolution will be influenced by localism.

Q: Can we expect a stronger bond between the military and Islamist parties, once they are in power?

- The relationship between Islamist movements and the military is not a comfortable one in Egypt. A showdown between the Muslim Brotherhood and the military is expected.

Comment: If we want to build a strategy for intervention, we have to ask whether the revolution is a result of the power of democrats or of the weakness of the dictatorship. If the revolution happens as result of instability, we should ask ourselves what caused that. There are three levels which we should take into account: (1) The reality: What happened? (2) The constructed revolutions: the images conveyed by the media. (3) The imagined revolution: the narrative of the activists. If I want to build a strategy, I have to ask what the relationship is between the real and the constructed revolution. To do this, we need to conduct more research. What is the impact of the revolution on freedom and democracy (e.g. on women)?

Q: In Tunisia, Islamists do not seem to focus on structural change. What is the scope to speak about transparency, corruption, housing rights? In Egypt, housing rights are addressed by the Salafists, not by the Muslim Brotherhood.

- It is difficult to predict who will take which position. The Islamists in Egypt might know what they do not want, but we need to see whether they have a policy too. It is a development in flux.
- The Islamist movement in Egypt has been involved in charity, with an eye on recruitment, for decades.

Q: Terminology matters: “dignity revolution” would be a more suitable term than “Arab spring”. We don’t know the outcome yet: the uprisings could lead to chaos, to partition, to fragmentation or to democracy. [Question about democracy promotion]

- If there is a proper democratic process, then there is a possibility of change. A society has to find its balances. It is maybe too early to call the current movement a revolution, because the systems have not changed yet. One can instead call it an uprising.
- The most important aspect is that people have found their voice. An Arabic newspaper wrote: “The Arabs have entered history” – this shows that there was a perception of being “outside history” before. Today, the face of the Arab region is changing quickly, with the majority of the population being young people. Their voices need to be heard.
- What should be promoted is participation and debate; the term “democracy promotion” carries a lot of baggage (and not all of it positive). *Discussing* democratic processes is more valuable than promoting them.

Q: Religion plays out in different ways, and it has been a force in the revolution. It will also play a role in the efforts of democratic development. In separate country contexts, what should we as outsiders know about this ascendant democratic discourse?

- One has to be careful not to debate everything in sectarian terms. This is encouraged by some international analysts and regional actors, like Saudi Arabia. But it should not be the basis for the new discourse around governance. The focus should be on institutions rather than on sectarian divides.

Comment: A young Libyan student said to me, “the revolution just started. We just removed one obstacle.” There is a big disparity between international and domestic perceptions of the revolutions. There is a difference between countries where state structures existed (e.g. Tunisia), and those where there was no state before, and institutions are being built up now. We are talking about “transitions”, but we should really talk about institutions and state building.

Comment: The economy will be our biggest challenge. People in Tunisia and Egypt are focusing on the constitution, on the scope of liberties, on freedom of expression and women’s rights. Questions about what kind of economy we want to have are not yet being addressed. The “Islamic economy” has not yet proven to be an actual policy; a focus on *zakat* (Islamic charity) is not a policy.

- People are being impatient, they would like to see change and, importantly, employment opportunities *now*.

Comment: The political ideologies have failed. These uprisings have focused on domestic issues, not on Palestine, Pan-Arabism, or a general ideology. Instead, freedom of speech and other core rights

issues were at the heart of the uprisings. However, the role of informal civil society groups has not yet been evaluated, and this should be a focus of support.

- The old forces are still very powerful in Egypt: We are seeing vicious attacks on the press and on civil society organisations. There is a counter-revolution, and it will hit women, the media and civil society harder than everyone else.
- The idea of networking and exchanging ideas is very important for the progressive movements in the region.

Q: Will the next tsunami of unrest come from the Gulf? Saudi Arabia has stopped the movement in Bahrain. Minorities and women's issues are creating enough pressure to cause fundamental changes in the Gulf.

- Political changes in the Gulf are not foreseeable in the near future. There could however be a movement of migrant workers, who in the United Arab Emirates constitute 80-90% of the population and around 40-50% in Kuwait.

Comment: In the area of housing, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt envisages a model of charity and reduced state involvement. This is positive for the human rights sector, as we have more options to influence charity. The greater section of the population is concerned about their economic and social rights.

Comment: Libya is very different from other states that have recently experienced a revolution. Libya has to build a state from scratch. And in terms of identity, Libyans are not all Arabis; we should focus on creating open societies where minorities are allowed to come to the forefront.

Q: What is required to enable a more professional civil society in the region?

- What is our concept of professionalising NGOs? Maybe they just need a space to sit together and think. We need to think out of the box and we have to contextualise what we are doing. We cannot use one blueprint for every social and national context. We need to listen to actors on the ground and find out from them what the needs are.