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The Arab Spring: Triggers, Dynamics and Prospects

Stephan Rosiny

On 17 December 2010, the self-immolation of Tunisian vegetable vendor Mohammed Bouazizi sparked the Arab Spring. Within a few months, a wave of protest had swept away the despots of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Since then protests have been keeping the region, which has until recently been viewed as having stable authoritarian regimes and as being largely resistant to democratization, on edge.

Analysis

Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, parliamentary elections and constitutional debates have been taking place in North Africa and the Middle East and the public discourse has been defined by open criticism of the remaining autocracies. How fundamental and sustainable these changes will prove to be cannot yet be judged with certainty. However, some striking commonalities can be noted.

- The initial spontaneity and lightness with which the opposition movements called the regimes into question stunned not only Western observers but also the Arab rulers themselves. After the initial surprise, the remaining autocracies returned – with only limited success to date – to their former methods of stabilizing their rule.
- The triggers, progression and intensity of the protests have varied from country to country. The reactions of the regimes have also ranged from cautious concessions to violent repression.
- Most Arab regimes suffer from massive legitimacy deficits, and the citizens are demanding to finally be able to participate more fairly in political, economic and societal events. Their protests exhibit similar symbols and reciprocal references. These parallels make the Arab Spring a momentous and novel event that will have a lasting impact on the region.
- Numerous Arab countries have seen a strengthening of moderate Islamist parties, which many people now view as competent and reliable alternatives to the existing regimes.

Keywords: Arab Spring, social movements, democratization, Islamism

The Outbreak of the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring actually began in the middle of winter. On 17 December 2010 a municipal inspector in the provincial Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid confiscated vegetable seller Mohammed Bouazizi's cart because he did not have a vending license. The inspector followed the typical routine, meaning that the young merchant probably needed either stronger connections to an influential person or enough money for a bribe more than he needed a license. His appeals to the powers that be were denied. This mixture of humiliation and powerlessness was apparently what drove him to the desperate act of publicly self-immolating in front of the local government building.¹

In the following hours and days, spontaneous solidarity rallies cropped up, during which protesters were killed by security forces and thus became "martyrs" to be mourned at later rallies. Arab news channel Al-Jazeera, which eventually developed into the most important emotion-provoking and mobilizing medium of the Arab Spring, showed clips of the self-immolation and of the related demonstrations that were filmed using cell phone cameras. The protests quickly reached the capital city of Tunis and spread to neighboring countries. They expanded not only regionally but also in terms of social composition within individual countries. Soon, the protests included people from all walks of life: while the participants were mostly youth, protesters also included children, adults, the elderly, women and men, Muslims and Christians, the religious and the secular. In less than two months, the two supposedly most stable autocrats in the Middle East were overthrown: Tunisia's Zine el-Abidin Ben Ali on 14 January 2011, and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011.

At the beginning of 2011, protests and unrest broke out in almost every Arab country. The only countries that have thus far managed to avoid such problems are the Gulf monarchies of Qatar and, experiencing only marginal protests, the U.A.E., both of which guarantee their populations a worry-free life bankrolled by oil income.

The Arab Spring did not come out of left field. In most of the region's countries there have been demonstrations and strikes protesting social

hardships and despotism for years; since 2000, these protests have increasingly developed into transnational movements. The outbreak of the Second Intifada in the Palestinian territories in 2000, the US-led war in Iraq in 2003, and the Muhammad caricatures in 2005 and 2006 led to protests against Western and Israeli "aggressions" and to solidarity rallies for the victims of those actions. These demonstrations focused only secondarily on the inactivity of their own governments. Criticism of Israel's conduct in both the Lebanon War with Hezbollah (2006) and the Gaza War (2008–09) was combined with rage at the regimes of Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, who more or less openly sided with Israel.

The Dynamics of the Arab Spring Protests

Depending on political preference, either the Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 in Iran or the Cedar Revolution of March 2005 in Lebanon is cited as the role model for the Arab Spring's oppositional mobilization. The former has until recently been the only fundamental system transformation in the Middle East caused by a revolutionary mass movement; the latter led nonetheless to the withdrawal of Syrian troops. Iran's 2009 Green Revolution, following the fraudulent presidential election, is also often cited as a model.

Nevertheless, the border-transcending nature of its protests has marked the Arab Spring as a one-of-a-kind and monumental event. New are the protests' wave-like expansion, their cross-country interplay, and the astoundingly ideology-free discourse of the participants. The regional mobilization is no longer directed primarily at external enemies such as the U.S. or Israel, but rather advocates for an authentic Arab concern: the overthrow or the reform of authoritarian systems of rule. Cumulatively, the demonstrations have reached the level necessary to attract the attention of the global media; this has made it more difficult for the rulers to simply wait them out or to resort to sheer repression.

The broad solidarity within all segments of society as well as the movement's spontaneity and largely leaderless nature initially surprised the regimes and undermined suppression strategies they had formerly employed, such as arresting political leaders and villainizing protesters as foreign agents. The violent repression – thousands of

¹ Following his example, around the New Year dozens of other people self-immolated as well, though these acts did not have a similar mobilizing effect.

demonstrators died – and the mobilization across all social classes gave the protesters a moral superiority and legitimacy that was lost in inverse proportion by the repressive regimes. The wall of silence regarding the abuse of power – scandalous revelations on WikiLeaks about corruption and the political hypocrisy of the rulers started the ball rolling here – and the fear of state repression collapsed. The hope that the autocratic rulers would fall one after the other due to a domino effect has, however, not been realized so far. Since March 2011 they have increasingly been adapting to the new situation and have fallen back – with varying degrees of success – on time-tested tools for stabilizing their rule: They partially met the demonstrators' demands by scapegoating and replacing unpopular ministers or entire governments, or by promising constitutional reforms. They tried to secure support by reversing cutbacks to state subsidies for staple foods and energy sources, introducing new subsidies, rapidly creating new jobs in the state bureaucracy and the security apparatus, and promising wage increases. In Saudi Arabia King Abdullah announced two programs totaling 130 billion USD through which he would pay additional salary to civil servants, introduce support for the unemployed, create more than 60,000 new jobs, renovate mosques, and finance a building project for more than 500,000 apartments (Gause 2011). Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies took the endangered regimes in Bahrain, Oman, Morocco and Jordan, as well as Egypt's weak transitional military council (SCAF), under their wing with billions of dollars of support. Jordan and Morocco were offered admission to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the rich oil monarchies' club.

The autocrats continued to focus on dividing and discrediting the opposition. They badmouthed the protesters as "agents" of foreign powers (Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia), as "saboteurs" and "terrorists" (Syria), and as "rats and cockroaches" (Qaddafi in Libya), or they drew a fearsome picture of impending civil war along ethnic and religious lines (Bahrain, Syria). Political liberalization, they warned the West, would lead to increased power for Islamist fundamentalists and to jihadist terrorism (Yemen, Libya, Syria). When nothing else worked, they resorted to sheer repression. Bahrain set the precedent with the crushing of the occupation of Pearl Square, with the help of Saudi Arabian and U.A.E. troops, on 14

March 2011. Yemen followed suit, with 2,000 dead to date; in Libya the corresponding number is approximately 30,000. In Syria the number of victims is approaching 10,000 – more than 7,000 civilians and over 2,000 security personnel have been killed so far. In all three countries, however, parts of the opposition also took up arms. In Libya an international military coalition under NATO command – supported by U.N. Resolution 1973, which was passed on 17 March 2011 – intervened in the conflict on the side of the insurgents.

The despots' contradictory signals and frequent changes in tactic between accommodation and repression led to the escalation of the rebellions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Syria. Their pledges of reform during ongoing violent repression rendered these promises hollow. Hosni Mubarak's disappointing speech on 10 February 2011 could have been a warning for other rulers. He demonstrated absolutely no readiness to give up power, even though rumors that he would resign had been circulating. This furthered the determination of the demonstrators in Tahrir Square and sealed Mubarak's downfall – the military removed him from power the following day.

The monarchs, in contrast, conducted themselves much more cleverly – for example, King Mohammed VI of Morocco, who essentially positioned himself at the peak of the domestic reform movement by initiating a constitutional reform, thereby stabilizing his monarchy. The emir of Qatar, Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, even played the part of champion of the revolutionary transformation by financing the Al-Jazeera satellite station, participating in the military operation against the Qaddafi regime, and taking a leading role in preparing the sanctions against the Syrian regime.

Protest Demands

At the beginning, there were two different constellations at work in sparking the protests. In some countries, the educated youth were using social networking platforms such as Twitter and Facebook to call on people to demonstrate in the urban centers for more freedom and against despotism. These "happenings" had already occurred now and then in Egypt, Bahrain, Lebanon and Tunisia. This time, though, things took a different form because unexpectedly large numbers

of protestors showed up, and state repression led not to the end of the protests but instead to their increasing mobilization and escalation. In other countries – for instance, Tunisia, Jordan, Bahrain, Syria and Oman – rallies were initially started on the periphery by marginalized groups (whether along social, sectarian, ethnic or provincial lines).

In some countries, the protests remained restricted to individual groups, meaning that no broader, nationwide resistance was able to build up. In Saudi Arabia, the opposition splintered into the following groups: Shiites, who for decades had been demanding equal rights as citizens; women, who demonstrated publicly for their emancipation (symbolized by the right to drive); liberals, who demanded a loosening of rigid religious and social norms; and Salafists, for whom the moral looseness in the conservative kingdom had already gone too far.

The resistance spread particularly within countries where localized and urban protests tended to become national movements: above all in Tunisia, Bahrain and Libya. The demands of these national movements were accordingly extensive and included material improvements in the provision of food, housing and energy; improved services and better employment opportunities; and finally, reforms of the political system: democracy, the separation of powers, and reliable institutions. The demands were a reflection of the local conditions. In Egypt, Algeria and Syria, protestors called for the repeal of emergency legislation; in Iraq, the withdrawal of American occupying forces. Palestinians demanded that the West Bank's Fatah and the Gaza Strip's Hamas enter into a government of national unity to end the fragmentation of the Palestinian Authority. In Lebanon, a civil society movement demonstrated for the abolition of confessionalism, whereby family law and the division of political offices are determined by religious affiliation. Due to concerns over both intrasocietal polarization and the escalation of violence, the demands voiced by protestors in countries with histories of civil war like Lebanon, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria and Palestine were generally more moderate.

The unifying and overriding element of the socially heterogeneous protests was nevertheless moral and ethical principles, above all justice (*adalah*), freedom (*hurriyah*), dignity (*karamah*), and respect (*ihitiram*). The protestors' demands included

- that the authorities respect their rights as citizens rather than arrogantly infantilizing them as subordinates;
- a life of dignity rather than one defined by humiliating condescension and oppression by the security forces and public authorities;
- equality in access to resources and opportunities instead of clientelistic rewards for compliance;
- rule of law in place of both despotic rule and special privileges for the elites; and finally,
- the right to participate in the global trend toward prosperity, progress, education and democratic participation.

The most far-reaching demand, the overthrow of the current regime, was made only in countries where escalations of violence on the part of the respective regime took place, when incremental reforms under the existing elite thus no longer seemed possible. So far, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria are the only countries whose protestors have demanded regime change, although individual actors in Bahrain and Jordan have also levied demands to the tune of "*al-Sha'b yurid isqat al-nizam*" ("The people want to bring down the regime").

The Symbolism of the Arab Spring

During the Arab Spring a similar symbolism became evident across borders; this connected the otherwise heterogeneous protest movements and led to a reciprocal wave of increasing mobilization within the region. The symbols and slogans generated a culture of protest with a shared resonance which in turn led to its amplification. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter played a crucial role, as did cell phones; all of these were initially the most important means of communication and mobilization. Music also played a decisive role in disseminating the messages via pop culture.² Satellite TV stations such as Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya rapidly joined in; they reached a much broader audience, generated more emotion, helped mobilize populations, and made the connection to Western media, occasionally creating multi-link chains of communication: demonstrators' English and Arabic placards – filmed with cell phones and

² The Tunisian rapper El Général (<www.youtube.com/watch?v=IeGJJ7OouR0> 28 December 2011) and the Israeli hip-hop artist Noy Alooshe became particularly popular.

posted on the Internet, then shown on Arab satellite TV channels' footage, which was then broadcast by Western TV stations – were directed at a national, regional and global public.

The names Jasmine Revolution for Tunisia and Lotus Flower Revolution for Egypt, both coined by the West, did not stick.³ They alluded to predecessors such as Portugal's Clove Revolution in 1974, Georgia's Rose Revolution in 2003, and Lebanon's Cedar Revolution in 2005. The botanical names indicated a connection with the color revolutions.⁴ All these revolutions were fought from the center of their societies against archaic and rigid ruler-ship structures. The term Arab Spring, prevalent in the Western media, connotes a thawing that has caused the authoritarian structures to melt away, as it were, instead of being replaced through coups, political assassinations or externally driven "regime changes" – such as that in Iraq in 2003 – as they have been to date. Skepticism regarding the spring metaphor is evident in some Arab commentaries, as it implies democratization according to a Western-biased model. Some thus refer instead to the "January 14th Revolution" in Tunisia and the "Egyptian Revolution" or, generally, the "Arab Revolution" (*al-Thaura al-Arabiyya*).⁵

The revolutions did not present themselves as socialist, liberal or Islamist, but rather as uprisings against the system with a broad social basis of support. There was no elite avant-garde at the forefront; they were supported far more by social networks with flat hierarchies. Instead of charismatic *leaders*, it was "*heroes*" such as Bouazizi or the blogger Khalid Said, who was beaten to death by Egyptian police in summer 2010, who determined their image.

In some countries, the demonstrations began on deeply symbolic days. In Egypt, 25 January is "Police Day"; it was violent attacks by the police that the young protesters came together to protest on that day. In Bahrain 14 February was the anniversary of the 2001 referendum on a national reform charter, the implementation of which the demonstrators urged. In Libya several people demonstrating against the Muhammad caricatures

had been shot on 17 February 2006. A gathering of the victims' relatives on the anniversary of their murder escalated into violence and marked the beginning of the Libyan revolution. The opposition movements named themselves after special dates – for instance, the "14 January Front" in Tunisia, named after the day that Ben Ali left the country. The "14 February Movement" in Bahrain, the "20 February Movement" in Morocco, the "15 March Movement" in the Palestinian territories, and the "Youth of 24 March" in Jordan named themselves after the initial, taboo-breaking mass demonstrations in their respective countries.

Demonstration days were given proper names. The *Day of Anger* (*Yaum al-Ghadab*) marked the beginning of the wave of protests in Egypt, Palestine, Bahrain, Iraq, Libya, Jordan, Yemen and Saudi Arabia. The repetition of the same name generated immediate connections between protests. The creation of further named days mobilized and escalated the protests: there was thus the *Day of Dignity*, the *Day of Regret* (on 7 March 2011 in Iraq) and the *Day of the Country's Protectors* (27 May 2011), which was directed at the Syrian soldiers to motivate them to change sides. In Syria local coordination committees develop names and slogans for demonstrations that suit the situation; these are an important element of the staging and dramaturgy of the protest movements.

An additional border-transcending hallmark of the protests was the occupation of central streets and squares. In Tunisia it was at the Place de la Kasbah in Tunis that protesters camped out and raised their demands. Before the Arab Spring, demonstrations had already occasionally taken place on the Boulevard Habib Bourguiba. In Rabat rallies took place at the Avenue Mohamed V. However, it was Cairo's Liberation Square (Midan al-Tahrir), where numerous demonstrations and occupations have taken place since 25 January 2011, that became the common symbol of the Arab Spring. From the heart of Cairo and in close proximity to symbolic buildings such as the secret service headquarters, the Interior Ministry, the head office of the National Democratic Party (NDP) (in power at the time), and the Egyptian National Museum, images of the protesters were beamed over Al-Jazeera and many other media outlets to the whole world. The brutal attacks carried out by the former regime's security forces and by violent thugs took place before running cameras –

3 Zine el-Abidin Ben Ali called his 1987 seizure of power the "Jasmine Revolution," which is why the name is not viewed positively in Tunisia.

4 The Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004 and the Green Revolution in Iran in 2009.

5 North African Berbers and Syrian Kurds who have participated in the revolts reject this term because it excludes them as non-Arab ethnic groups.

possibly preventing worse excesses and completely discrediting Hosni Mubarak's regime.

In Bahrain demonstrators copied the successful Egyptian example and tried to continuously occupy Manama's Pearl Roundabout (Dawwar al-Lu'lu'ah) from 14 February 2011 on, despite the security forces' violent course of action. The square is named after a gigantic statue that was erected in 1982 and symbolized the unity of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The regime feared that the square could become the emblem of a national uprising and had the distinctive statue torn down on 18 March 2011 after the square was forcibly cleared. In Yemen the regime used Sanaa's symbolic Liberation Square, which was occupied by Saleh loyalists, for its own purposes, while the opposition erected its tents on the square in front of the university and renamed it the Square of Change (Sahat al-Taghyir).

With the occupation of the squares, each population took possession of the geographical center – the heart of the nation, as it were – and “cleaned” it of the “corrupt” regime.⁶ The national flags became a mobile part of this symbolism. In Libya the protesters and insurgents used the flag of the monarchy (1951–69) to link their movement to the pre-Qaddafi era. In Syria the opposition forces have replaced the current flag with the one used before the Ba'ath party came to power. The Salafi Islamists in Egypt, who used the Saudi flag, were an exception. Berbers in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco used their own flags – not, however, as an expression of separatism but rather of their common identity. The protests on Puerta del Sol in Madrid and on Rothschild Boulevard in Israel as well as the Occupy Movement in the U.S. and Europe drew upon the symbolism of the Arab Spring. The demonstrators adopted the action of occupying squares, the catchy names for demonstration days, and the ambitious claim of representing “the people” or “the 99 percent” against a small elite enriching itself excessively.

⁶ Following Hosni Mubarak's overthrow, the demonstrators not only symbolically but also physically cleaned “their” liberated square and made it the symbol of a new beginning. Since then protest demonstrations to defend the collectively won revolution have taken place there regularly.

Prospects for the Future

At the beginning of 2011, a transnational wave of protest – later to be referred to (in the West) as the Arab Spring – gripped North Africa and the Middle East. The process of change is irreversible, although its future course cannot be predicted at this time. Its outcome will depend greatly on how successful the democratic transitions of the republics of Tunisia and Egypt turn out to be, on whether a way out of the spiraling violence in Syria and Yemen is found, and finally on whether the remaining, only partially reformed autocracies have learned their lessons. What was the strength of the Arab Spring early on – namely, the largely leaderless, ideologically unbiased challenging of the repressive machine – is increasingly proving to be a weak point in the political autumn.

Given the delegitimization of the previous regimes, the transitioning countries face the challenge of erecting state institutions and rules and regulations that have a wider legitimacy and reflect the participation of the broadest swath of society possible. In the wake of their respective revolutions, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya have started building new institutions; in other countries (Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, Kuwait), the differing demands of the various opposition groups for institutional reforms and concessions on the part of the regime have defined the post-revolution periods. Crisis management policies like those of the GCC states that are centered on the royalty giving gifts to their populations will not yield sustainable development and lasting stability; on the contrary, the gap between paternalistic rulers and increasingly self-confident populations will widen.

The path to reform is rocky, as ideological preferences and contradictory interests clash at every decision. The institutions that reciprocally support the legitimacy of the other institutions – the parliament, administration, judiciary, constitutional convention, president and security forces – first have to be reintroduced step by step: Should the institutional design begin with the rules and the constitution, or with democratically legitimized representation? Who will be authorized to set the electoral rules and monitor the elections, to determine which parties can participate and how to divide up the constituencies? A more transparent and participatory process of negotiation, mutual recognition and collaboration can lead to long-term legitimacy and sustainable stability. One

possible danger is that parts of the population might view this process as dragging on too long and thus lose interest, resulting in a loss of credibility for the new institutions. The high expectations on all sides for a more just division of the national wealth and for a quick economic recovery following the overthrow of the corrupt rulers have not been fulfilled. Instead, the socioeconomic situation has worsened because many tourists have stayed away and businesses have suffered losses due to strikes and protests.

Moderate Islamists and radical Salafists are profiting in particular from this uncertain situation. Their religious ethos distinguishes them from other groups and enables them to soften the frustrations of the population regarding disappointments and material losses by encouraging patience (as suggested by God) and reminding believers of the promise of rewards they can hope to gain in the hereafter. Their worldview is flexible enough to address a wide social spectrum of society, but they are also authoritative and possess a strong ethical mandate. They address rural and urban citizens, uneducated people as well as intellectuals, the young and old, and women and men in equal measure. Even before the Arab Spring, moderate Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood had already enjoyed significant successes in (relatively) free elections (Jordan 1989, Algeria 1991, Egypt 2005, Palestinian Territories 2006). Even though they were not always at the vanguard, they played a meaningful role throughout the Arab Spring uprisings, and they enjoy a reputation of having continuously worked for years to oppose the authoritarian regimes. Because of their networks of religious, social and political institutions, they also have organizational structures and experience at their disposal that the new oppositional forces still do not have. That is why it was no surprise that they had such a good showing at the first free elections in Tunisia on 23 October 2011, where they garnered 41.5 percent of the vote; in Morocco on 25 November 2011, where the moderate Islamist party PJD was the best-performing party with 27 percent of the vote and where their candidate even became prime minister (Eibl 2011); and in Egypt and Kuwait, where they performed extraordinarily well in the most recent parliamentary elections. In upcoming elections in Libya, Yemen and Jordan, Islamists are being treated as viable candidates.

So far, the moderate Islamists have proven themselves successful, especially in unisectarian countries. However, in multisectarian countries like Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, Sunni and Shiite actors compete against each other: the Islamists seem to be reaching the limits of their inclusionary policies when it comes to the Sunni–Shiite divide. The strong showing of fundamentalist Salafists, who strive for a strict Islamicization of society and politics, has also been surprising. The Salafists could prove to be the biggest challenge for the moderate Islamists, as the former bring the latter's devotion to Islam in question. But in Egypt, it is already becoming clear that even the Salafists are subject to pressure to adapt to civilized political interactions and that they are starting to moderate their demands (Brown 2011).

The citizens of Arab countries are demanding the right to participate in politics, business and society, along with the freedom to decide which worldview they want to follow in designing their own lives. Instead of engaging militarily, the West should participate in the changes in the Middle East as a nonpaternalistic partner and take part in dialogues with the new political actors.

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GIGA's research on political Islam is carried out within the framework of the "Religion, Conflict and Politics" research team, which is part of Research Program 2: Violence and Security.

■ Related GIGA Publications

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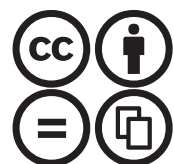
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