

# The causes of arab spring

[Sociology](#), [Social Issues](#)



## **Introduction**

The Middle East has been the crucible of conflict for over a decade with numerous revolutions and civil wars occur in places such as Egypt, Syria, Tunisia the West Bank, Jordan and Bahrain. For the purposes of this essay, I will examine the causes of what some would refer to as the “ historic turning point in human history” (Wright 2017) of Middle Eastern polity, society and democracy; the Arab Spring. The term ‘ Arab Spring’ encapsulates the revolutionary wave of both violent and non-violent demonstrations which began in 2010 and spread across the twenty-two countries of the Middle East and North Africa, collectively known as MENA.

## **Poverty, Corruption, Awareness of the Power of the Mmedia**

When discussing this question, one must consider the virulent underlying factors which led to the popular demonstrations that challenged and toppled the autocratic rulers across MENA. Socio-economic poverty which is largely attributed to the “ rise of unemployment, inflation of food prices, low income and rising inequality” (Abdel Meguid, et al. 2011). A pervading corruption and brutality was demonstrated by “ police brutality against activists” (Abdel Meguid, et al. 2011). A prevalent lack of political freedom created a “ persistent rule by terror...the prohibition on political rights and civil freedoms” (Abdel Meguid, et al. 2011)., Crucially too, there was a growing and increasingly more sophisticated awareness of the power of the media seen through “ the spread of virtual-opposition through social networking websites and the Arabic satellite” (Abdel Meguid, et al. 2011). Together, these factors contributed to a decade of global unrest which escalated and

became known as the Arab Spring in what is now recognised as the worst decade of unrest in the modern history of the Middle East.

## **A Decade of Uncertainty**

The Arab Spring, grew out of a decade of uncertainty characterised by events such as the global economic crisis in 2008 which inevitably “ had serious repercussions, such as growing youth unemployment rates, in the states where uprisings took place” (Milton-Edwards 2018). The young demographic were the most affected where “ over 53% of the population is under the age of 24” (Rogan 2010) but in the Middle East, the precarious nature of the pre-existing economic state exacerbated the situation. For example, by 2009, according to UN figures, “ youth unemployment rates in the Middle East were the highest in the world, with figures ranging from 20 to 40% in individual countries.” (Rogan 2010)

This youthful population, predominantly male population in places such as Tunisia and Egypt had grown increasingly disenchanted with their governing body; “ many young Tunisians – including those who brought about the revolution in the first place – have lost patience in their government and regularly express their frustration in the street” (Yerkes 2017). The socio-economic unrest of the vanguard was fuelled by disillusion as autocratic governments promised but then failed to provide for the needs of their citizens in return for an absolute monopoly over politics. In Egypt, which suffered from a severe fall in wages, the government “ did nothing to stop spiralling price rises or cuts in government subsidies on basic foods such as flour or bread” (Milton-Edwards 2018).

This is a common theme of the 21st century in the Middle East whereby Arab states have not responded to their citizens' needs but rather have retaliated to the growing discontent of the legitimate grievances “ by becoming ever more repressive” (Rogan 2010).

## **9/11 and the Invasion of Iraq**

Another contributing factor to the Arab Spring occurred as a result of the 9/11 attacks in 2001. The Egyptian President “ Mubarak decided to support George Bush’s global war on terror as well as the invasion of Iraq” (Stacher 2013). This sparked public outrage in Egypt and “ protests about these issues quickly turned into protests against the Egyptian President” (Stacher 2013) provoked the Prime Minister, Ahmed Nazi’s support of a policy of neo-liberalism, which had created a stark divide between the elite rich and the poor masses despite the rapid economic growth. “ The experience of neoliberalism in the MENA region...resulted in a ‘ crony capitalism’ where politically connected actors benefited from the privatisation of public assets and the deregulation of economic sectors, while workers experienced wage stagnation and rising unemployment” (Joya 2016). As a result, “ over two million workers participated in more than 2, 100 strikes between 2006-2009” (Stacher 2013).

Conversely, while these waves of revolution protested against the Egyptian political elite, the protests “ never threatened the state’s cohesion of Mubarak’s presidency” (Stacher 2013). They did however produce an “ environment of political learning among the varied oppositions movements”

(Stacher 2013) which theoretically led to the uprising that swept the Arab world in 2011.

## **The Availability of Information and Bouazizi's Self-Immolation**

“ The Arab Spring had one trigger but many causes” (Sassen 2013) but one of the significant catalysts of the Arab Spring was the availability of information to the general public through social (Facebook) and Political Media (Al-Jazeera), which Nasser Weddady refers to as “ the people’s news agency” (Weddady 2015). This ‘ media enlightenment’ initially occurred due to the Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks exposure of the greed, corruption, nepotism and dishonesty that was disseminated throughout the Middle East in an exponential manner as exemplified by “ the excesses of wealth amassed by President Ben Ali and his family, including his wife Leila Trabelsi...which provided details of high-end luxury car concessions... shipping, drugs and transport” (B. Milton-Edwards 2018).

This confirmed the people’s suspicions of a disjunct between the political elite of their nations and the masses. Tunisians grew increasingly more anti-government vis WikiLeaks ‘ leak’ occurring only “ two weeks before the desperate young fruit-seller Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire” (Bachrach 2011).

In December 2010, Bouazizi was beaten by municipal inspectors in the streets of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, for not being able to pay off a bribe. Later that day, the governor ordered him to be beaten again for expressing his discontent at the municipality. “ Confronted by corruption, injustice, and

public humiliation, Mohamad doused himself with paint thinner outside the gates of the governor's office and set himself on fire" (Rogan 2010).

Without doubt the media and Bouazizi's self-immolation, provoked by corruption and brutality, are the two, most significant reasons why the Arab Spring occurred. It is their nexus which provided the catalyst for the uprisings. This desperate act of self-violence triggered rampant protests throughout Tunisia. Erroneous propaganda claims " that Bouazizi was an unemployed university graduate reduced to selling vegetables to make ends meet" (Rogan 2010).

The restless young graduates and the educated unemployed who made these claims then created a Facebook group whereby the story was broadcasted by Al-Jazeera to a global Arab audience. Their reverence for Bouazizi proved that his self-immolation had " galvanised public outrage against everything that was wrong in Tunisia under President Ali: corruption, abuse of power, indifference to the plight of the ordinary man, and an economy that failed to provide opportunities for the young" (Rogan 2010).

Fuelled by this antipathy, demonstrations spread, causing internecine acts of violence that " pierced the thin veneer of the structures of inequality and repression in place in the Arab world" (Soguk 2013) thereby creating the catalyst for the Arab Spring.

## **Corruption and Lack of Political Freedom**

As the corruption of power and a lack of political freedom are often inextricably linked, it is pertinent to consider these uprisings in the context

of their political regimes. Extensive crony-capitalist states ruled by political elites with complete autonomy over the regulation of citizens' lives conspired to place severe restrictions on political freedom. In Tunisia “ the only subjects that they [the national press] are allowed to cover are those in the TAP's (Tunis Afrique Press) news schedules, and most of the time these are official activities. Any additional initiative is unwelcome” (Jacquard 2017).

When Zine EL Abidine Ben Ali became Prime Minister of Tunisia in 1987, he silenced dissidents by creating a monopoly of autocratic control over the press and civil society. “ Using either seduction, intimidation or repression, the authorities have taken over the main news media, which are nowadays managed by the government directly or by the regime's supporters” (Jacquard 2017). The citizens of states such as Tunisia and Jordan “ were prevented from voicing dissent, calling for reform or any form of criticism against state power-holders” (B. Milton-Edwards, Contemporary Politics in the Middle East 2018).

In Jordan where widespread protests broke out in 2011 because it was ruled that “ criticising the king is punishable by up to three years in prison, while slandering a government official carries a penalty of up to one year” (Zacharia 2010). Corruption and a lack of political freedom are often synonymous because corruption “ also means that nepotism works strongly to stifle professionalism and meritocracy in public service” (B. Milton-Edwards 2018). The release of US diplomatic cables from 2006 by the Norwegian newspapers, *Aftenposten* underlined this with estimates that “ 50% of the country's economic elite was somehow related to Ben Ali, and

warn that they were increasingly showing off their opulence in public” (Cole 2011) thereby inevitably “ raising the hackles of the poor and unemployed” (Cole 2011).

So perhaps the events of 2010 and 2011 were inevitable in that we have a skilled, and educated, workforce who were receiving neither merit nor jobs due to the crony-capitalist regime in which they lived. This, along with a blatant display of conspicuous consumption by the elite has been referred to as a “ fundamental impediment to meaningful political liberalisation” (Cole 2011).

Further incitements to the Arab Spring can be seen within the ‘ police states’ of Tunisia and Egypt, where rulers could “ send their citizens to notorious state security courts, shackle the independence of their legislatures...and repress meaningful organised opposition” (B. Milton-Edwards, Contemporary Politics in the Middle East 2018) which lead inevitably led to a mass mobilisation of discontent as “ fear of their rulers and state-agents, insecurity at the limited opportunity to participate in economies and societies building for national prosperity, and lack of freedom were catalysts for change” (B. Milton-Edwards, Contemporary Politics in the Middle East 2018).

In Egypt, under Mubarak’s rule, the state prevented “ free association, engaged in censorship of the media, banned most trade union organisations and used legislation to keep wages low” (B. Milton-Edwards 2018); and was one of the main reasons why the Egyptian army sided with the protestors as they thought this was a legitimate reason to revolt; the “ Egyptian army



refused to support the government and declared the protestors' demands legitimate (Rogan 2010)

## **Conclusion**

Undeniably, the Arab spring has altered the course of Middle Eastern history. Cause by economic instability, corruption and oppression and a lack of political freedom the Arab Spring spawned new sense of Arab identity, “ defined by popular demands for political freedoms, human rights, and dignity” (Rogan 2010). Ramadan suggests that the men and women of these crony-capitalist states have proved that despite their susceptibility to manipulation through fear and insecurity, they cannot be completely controlled when uniting through a Pan-Arab force. They have proved that dictators can be “ overthrown without weapons, by sheer force of number” (Ramadan 2012) in hope of reaching a democratised environment.

Whether or not the Middle East has reached this stage is debatable, however, what is certain is that they proved that they can now jettison “ their historic posture as victims and reconcile themselves with the course of history that millions of women and men have so massively accelerated by coming out into the streets” (Ramadan 2012). A message on a placard in Tahir square in 2011, read, “ the people should not fear their government, governments should fear their people” (Rogan 2010).

In conclusion, the Arab Spring was caused by the increasing pervasiveness of social, economic and political grievances which went on to create an uncontrollable uprising against the oppressive states of MENA. A notable point is that the causes of the Arab Spring were the same as those any other

coup d'état. The theory of revolution hasn't differed in the sense that it still contains the "mechanics of communal solidarity" (Stone 1996) exemplified through Pan-Arabism. The only differing aspect of the Arab Spring was the speed at which it occurred and how so many countries rose up against their oppressive states despite the disparate nature of their people due to one cause but many triggers (Sassen 2013).

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