

# Origins of the arab spring

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## **Abstract**

This report presents an in-depth analysis of the Arab Spring that recently erupted in several Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa. It provides an overview of events that took place during the uprising, specifically in Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria. This report also highlights some of the demographic characteristics about Arab countries that make them prone to revolutions by their citizens. The impacts of the Arab Spring on the local regional and global scale are also mentioned in the report.

### 1. Introduction

The ‘ Arab Spring’ is a term that refers to the recent politically charged uprisings that took place in Arab countries in the Middle East and North Africa. Several country leaders were ousted from power as the Arab spring unfolded. This is because one of its key objectives was to get rid of regimes that were characterized by dictatorship, high unemployment rates, nepotism and general oppression of common citizens. As it was stated by Ajami (2012), the Middle East was run by tyrants who had taken up ownership of their countries. Many Arabs had a feeling that they had been cursed and that the running of affairs in their countries was a source of moral embarrassment. All the events in the Arab Spring originated from an act of protest by Bouazizi, a 26-year-old man from Tunisia on 17th December, 2010. He set himself on fire after a brush with police forces. As reported by The Telegraph (2011), “ his cart was confiscated by a policewoman who slapped him and spat in his face”. This adds police brutality to the perils that

Arabs were going through in regimes prior to the spring. This report aims to present an in-depth look into events before, during and after the recent Arab spring.

## 2. Events During the Arab Spring

Bouazizi succumbed to injuries sustained after torching himself in protest. However, the events that followed transformed Tunisia's political landscape. Mass protests were organized over oppression, unemployment and the wide gap in income between the rich and the poor. The ultimate goal of the protests was to ensure that Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, the then president of the country, is removed from office. Slightly less than a month after the protests started, Ben Ali fled Tunisia on 14th January, 2011 after ruling for twenty four years (Willis, 2012). This victory of Tunisian reformists inspired protestors in neighbouring Egypt, who believed that they had to end Hosni Mubarak's thirty-year reign of the country. Egypt protests were brutally resisted by security forces. In February 2011, the persistent protestors succeeded in making Mubarak to leave office (Abou-El-Fadl, 2012). The third casualty was Libya, whose protests were triggered by the arrests of human rights lawyers in February, 2011. These protests took a violent turn, with the opposition being assisted by NATO in destabilizing the Libyan army. In October 2011, after eight months of fierce exchanges between the army and protestors, Gaddafi's rule was brutally ended when he was captured executed (Prashad, 2012). In the Middle East, countries that experienced Arab spring protests were Syria, Yemen and Bahrain. Just like it was experienced in North Africa, protests in these countries were violent and received brutal resistance from police and other security forces. After surviving an execution attempt, Ali

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Abdullah Saleh, who had been Yemen's president for over 30 years, resigned in 2012. However, Bashar Al-Assad, Syria's president managed to cling to his presidency amidst criticism from the international community (Weyland, 2012).

### 3. Characteristics of Arab Countries that triggered the Arab Spring

Springborg (2011) argues that the economic conditions in Arab countries are not conducive for democratic leadership. There is a high dominance of governments in the private sector, a fact that limits the sources from which autonomous organizations can draw capital. As a result, these countries score negatively in terms of employment and other aspects that contribute to economical stability. Dominance of businesses by the government gives it an economic advantage over its opposition. Unless reforms are made to reduce the economic power of governments, attainment of democracy is difficult (Campante & Chor, 2012; Stepan & Linz, 2013). With no financial power to match that of the government and minimal avenues through which grievances can be made, mass protests were the only viable options for the oppressed. Thus, the majority of the population collaborated against the few who were in power. However, there is no assurance that ousting one person from power and transferring it to another can bring instant economic transformations to a country.

According to Springborg (2011), the attainment of democracy in the Middle East is challenged by the fact the economies are too young, poor and rural. For a democratic transition to effectively take place in a country, Cincotta and Doces (2011) established that the median age of the country's

population has to be approximately thirty. However, Arab countries have the second lowest median ages in the world. Tunisia is the oldest, with a median age of 29. Such youthful ages, according to Springborg (2011), are associated with volatility, a characteristic that was displayed in the Arab spring.

For democracy to be effectively sustained, the per capita annual income for citizens was approximated in 1997 to be \$6, 000 (Przeworski & Limongi, 1997). Given that this was 15 years ago, the current figure is \$12, 000. Apart from Tunisia, the per capita GDPs of Arab countries are currently less than \$6, 000. The attainment of democracy is also closely related to how urbanized regions are (Davis & Henderson, 2003). Even though there are varying degrees of urbanization in the Arab world, the overall level of urbanization is lower than expected. This is even worsened by the fact that Egypt has been in the process of de-urbanizing since 1986 (Springborg, 2011).

Other factors that pose a challenge to democracy in the Arab world include shrunken middle classes, high illiteracy levels among populations, insecurity and overdependence on governments. Arabians from the poor, rich and middle class heavily rely on their governments for their wellbeing. This has increased the governments' budgets on subsidies of energy and food (Springborg, 2011). For these reasons, governments are largely authoritarian. This leaves those in power at liberty to do whatever they please with the resources of their countries, regardless of what effects it shall have on other citizens. This also contributed to the rage among protestors who complained about the ineffective distribution of resources.

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#### 4. Impacts of the Arab Spring

There are several impacts that resulted from the Arab Spring on both local and international levels. For countries that actively took part and ousted their leaders, the vacancies had to be filled. This led to the competition of leadership among several groups, each considering itself the right heir of leadership (Brom, 2012). These included groups fighting for democracy, Islamic organizations, military groups and groups allied to previous regimes. However, the current reality in these countries is that the potential of Islamic organizations getting power is higher than that of the other groups.

In the entire Middle East, the Arab Spring brought about a shift in the interests of each country. Prior to the spring, countries in the Middle East had segmented themselves into groups, each contesting to attain regional leadership. The two main groups into which these countries were divided were the anti-western camp and pro western camp. The anti-western camp was against the ideologies of countries from the west and posed certain challenges for the international community. On the other hand, the pro-western camp was moderate and supported some ideals of the west. After the spring, countries quit contesting for supremacy and concentrated on their own domestic issues. Relationships between these countries have considerably reduced to a minimum (Yadlin, 2012). Vacuums that were left after the revolution are being filled and measures are being taken to prevent such uprisings from taking place in countries that did not experience them.

On a global scale, countries are competing for a chance to participate in reshaping the Middle Eastern countries in the aftermath of the revolution.

The Russians and Chinese are competing with western countries to support these countries, each pursuing its own interests in these countries. Several countries from the European region have also shown interest in assisting these nations to undergo a successful democratic transformation (Perthers, 2011). Businesses have also seen an opportunity in investing in these countries.

Just like the Spring of Nations, the Eastern European Spring and the Prague Spring in 1848, 1980s and 1968, respectively (Susser, 2012), attaining an equilibrium state after the Arab spring is expected to take quite some time. Whether the regimes that shall take over leadership shall overcome all challenges and embrace democracy is a fact that is unknown at present.

## 5. Conclusion

The Arab Spring was triggered by political and social problems that are synonymous with most of the Arab countries. As it has been indicated in this report, most of these problems have occurred because of the lack of democracy. The key cause of this revolution was the utter dissatisfaction of the people with their rulers, whose leadership had been characterized by huge gaps between the rich and the poor, violations of the rights of their citizens, dictatorial rules, high levels of unemployment and poverty. It is also argued by some researchers that the spring might have been inspired by the Kyrgyz revolution that took place in 2010. Impacts of the Arab Spring have been felt across the globe, with countries competing to participate in the transition of these countries while at the same time pursuing their personal

interests. However, addressing the challenges that face Arab countries needs a lot of resources and time.

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