

The arab spring

[History](#)



The Arab Spring – Can It Avoid Death? A high degree of pessimism continues to hold a strong grip over the enthusiasts of democracy in the Arab world. In the last one year or so, the popular uprisings for social and political change have stalled in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. In Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, where the populace succeeded in toppling the authoritarian rulers, things did not change that much. Violence, conflicts, and killings of political opponents disturbingly characterize all the Arab countries affected by the popular uprisings.

On the whole, the success rate of democratization is so far disappointing. That begs the question whether the Arab popular uprisings for democratic change, what the media conveniently dubbed the ‘ Arab Spring’, are dead or still alive. Certainly, the Arab Spring is not dead; prevailing political and economic realities do, however, indicate that it is inching towards the death bed. Though it is too early to make such an assertion, the insurmountable political and economic challenges facing the post-revolutionary governments portend less hope for its success.

There exist huge gaps between what the pro-democracy forces expected from the revolutions, that is, the expectations of transforming their societies away from authoritarian to democratic order, and what has been achieved or what is achievable on the ground. Neither national conditions nor global developments appear propitious to favor the goals and expectations of the pro-democracy forces. The Arab Spring, in stark contrast to other great historical revolutions, is marked by a series of distinctive features, and many of its weaknesses largely originate from these distinctive features.

This is probably the first time in history that popular uprisings for social and political change kicked off without a particular ideology to promote. The Arab youths who organized the uprisings and shaped its course come from different political persuasions; they had no common political platform, no common political thread to tie them together. Neither in the post-uprisings period did they galvanize their political spirit by floating a common political party to consolidate their victories against the anti-democratic, counter-revolutionary forces.

Equally noticeable was the absence of able leaders to guide the uprisings to successful conclusions. True, there existed some timid political parties in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen but no revolutionary or visionary leaders in the likes of George Washington, V. I. Lenin, Mahatma Gandhi, Ayatollah Khomeini or Nelson Mandela. These political parties were hesitant to join the pro-democracy popular movements but tried to catch up once protesters defied the security forces and went out of control of the autocratic regimes.

The leadership vacuum has put the army initially and then the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Ennahda Party in Tunisia, a conglomerate of anti-Gaddafi forces in Libya, and elements of the old guards in Yemen in power. The beginning rather sounded inauspicious. Worse of all, the uprisings have fostered close collaboration between democratic and counter-revolutionary camps. The conservative Gulf monarchies, except Kuwait to a large extent, are the most fortified anti-democratic fort of the Middle East.

In order to preserve hereditary rules and oil money-supported patronage systems, the Saudi King Abdullah sent troops on 14 March 2011 to suppress the popular demands for political and economic reforms in the island

kingdom of Bahrain. The US, which has its Fifth Fleet based in Bahrain and a welter of strategic and business interests throughout the Gulf, acquiesced to Saudi intervention. Iran was projected as the enemy out there to take advantage.

The Saudis, the Qataris and the Americans also found themselves onboard to oust Muammar Gaddafi through NATO-led military assault on Libya – a wonderful episode of cooperation between democracy and authoritarianism history will preserve in its archive for good. The young Egyptians, Libyans, Tunisians and Yemenis have defied all authoritarian hurdles to set their homelands on the track to democracy. They did not dream of becoming European liberals or American conservatives overnight but were motivated by the need to bury their authoritarian past and build their countries anew.

There is a minimum expectation that propels every great revolution. In 1917 the Russian proletariat and the unpaid armed forces supported V. I. Lenin's socialist revolution in the hope of securing a guaranteed future for bread and butter; the French revolutionaries of 1789 mobilized the common Frenchmen by promising an end to monarchical absolutism and the promulgation of inalienable rights, citizenships for all and good governance.

In 2011, the Arab youths and mass people started their uprisings believing that they would be better off in a post-authoritarian system. Their expectations focused on achieving three principal goals – freedom from want, freedom from fear, and the freedom to live in dignity what together make up human security, a concept the UNDP first popularized in 1994. Human security is widely defined as ' safety from the constant threats from hunger, disease, crime and repression'.

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The achievement of human security in the post-revolutionary Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen requires, at a minimum, enough employment creations for the Arab youth bulge (15 - 29 age brackets) who constitute one-third of the total population, elimination of masspoverty(that ranges from 25 per cent in Egypt to 54. 5 per cent in Yemen) and economic inequalities, the elimination of conflicts, crimes and violence, and an end to intimidations, illegal tortures, and discriminations.

In a nutshell, in order for the Arab Spring to stay alive, the post-uprisings Arab governments must achieve a minimum level of economic development to satisfy the basic needs of their people, and reorient the political order to secure good governance andsocial justicefor all. The big question is: can they do it? Both insiders and outsiders easily comprehend that much of the violence and conflicts that keep battering Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen originate from the lack of adequate economic provisions for the common people.

The initial euphoria for democracy, it seems, may not last long unless the economy picks up dynamism with job promises for the young people. A 2012 Pew Research Center poll has found that the common Arabs prefer a strong economy to a democratic government. One does not need to be a genius like Karl Marx to grasp the simple idea that economics shapes the patterns of politics. The Egyptians are particularly frustrated that their post-revolution economic condition is worse than it was under Hosni Mubarak.

Fiscal crisis and current account imbalances are more than threatening to the goals of pro-democracy movements. Egypt's foreign currency reserves dropped from \$36 billion in 2010 to \$24 billion by July 2011 and by January

2013 it shrank to \$13.6 billion; foreign investors pulled \$5.5 billion by the end of 2011 and foreign direct investment declined sharply; GDP growth rate slid to 1.8 per cent in 2011 to 1.5 per cent in 2012 creating many economic woes for the Egyptians.

The same picture is visible in Tunisia and Yemen. The dictators vanished leaving behind their economies in shambles. Under Hosni Mubarak, Egypt strongly pursued a pro-market private sector-led development strategy till his fall in February 2011. Late Anwar El-Sadat introduced this strategy in the mid-1970s that marked a cut-off point from Gamal Abdel Nasser's social contract that guaranteed employments for the educated youths and free social services for the common Egyptians in exchange for political loyalty.

Mubarak's son Gamal Mubarak, groomed as the next in succession line, pursued a rapid privatization program and sold most state corporations to private Egyptian businessmen and investors from Brazil, China, Russia, the US, and the Gulf Arab states. The program spread elite corruption and sharply widened the gaps between the rich and the poor effectively turning Egypt into a two-tier society. In Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali established a family fiefdom where his family members and relatives came to firmly control the economic and commercial activities of the country.

The common Tunisians suffered so much so that their patience broke down once the college graduate Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December 2010. In Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh dispensed power and patronage through biased tribal and regional systems that bred discontents nationally and ignited rebellion in some parts of the country. Al-Qaeda fighters stepped in to take advantage of domestic political and economic

grievances created by Saleh's misrule. A quick improvement in post-revolutionary economies requires nothing less than economic miracles but this is very unlikely to happen.

A few steps that seem urgent include a bold transition to market economy, introduction of sound fiscal and economic growth strategies to create employment opportunities for the youth bulge, policies to reduce social and economic gaps between the rich and the poor and simultaneous democratization of the political order at a pace people find acceptable. Libya may find the transition relatively easy since money coming from the oil sector gives it substantial leverage to navigate through financial and economic difficulties.

The Libyan government earned a total of \$54.9 billion in 2012 in oil and gas revenues with a state budget of approximately the same amount for the same year to finance (50 billion Libyan dinars budget). For resource-poor Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen there is no easy solution. Their limited capacities to deal with post-revolution social and economic problems are chipped away by the continuing global economic recession, particularly the economic decline in the European Union (EU) member states.

The economies of Egypt and Tunisia are more integrated with the EU; Tunisia, in particular, is sensitive to the ripple effects of what happens in the big EU economies. The economic and social problems are complicated more by the evolving patterns of politics. Except in Yemen, the Islamists are in control in all the post-revolutionary Arab states. Long repressed by the Arab autocrats, the Islamists rose to power by capitalizing on the weaknesses of the secular political forces and by dint of their organizational strength.

The electoral victories of Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Ennahda Party in Tunisia did not bring with them a wealth of democratic state and nation-building experiences. While in the opposition they found too many faults with the now toppled dictators but once in power they started wavering in action, sometimes making the politically counterproductive decisions. The violent popular reactions to power grab by Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi is just a case at hand.

In the absence of governance experiences and a development plan to stimulate economic growth to steer clear of political discontents, many Islamists turned to Turkey under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) rule since 2002 as a possible model to emulate. Soon after the Tunisian revolution, the Ennahda Party leader Rachid Ghannouchi told a press conference that his party would follow the Turkish model. A 2011 TESEV (Turkish Economic and Social Studies Center) public opinion survey in the Arab world found that 66 per cent of Arabs preferred Turkey as a model for their respective countries.

Though opinions on what the Turkish model exactly means are divided, a simple articulation of the model points to the coexistence of democracy, political Islam, and successful economic liberalization. The Islamic AKP coexists with secular political parties in a secular democratic state structure without Islamizing the face and identity of Turkey but supervising rapid economic development with an average 8 per cent growth rate in 2010 and 2011. That marks a fundamental shift from the pre-2002 Kemalists-led state-imposed, elitist, and military supervised economic and political modernization of Turkey.

Turkey, as a Muslim country and also because of its geographic proximity, appeals to the Arab world but it is doubtful whether Egypt, Libya or Tunisia can follow the footsteps of AKP. There is limited prospect for these countries at best to score big on issues like Turkish-style successful transition to market economy and integration into the global markets, a sufficient level of economic development to cope with the pressures of population growth, and efficient governance systems.

Turkey itself is also experiencing economic contraction as its economy grew only by 1.6 per cent in the third quarter of 2012. What hopes the economically less developed, less modernized Egypt, Tunisia or Yemen hold out for their people? While the AKP, being an Islamic party, has not really attempted to bring about Islamic transformation of Turkey, the Arab Islamic political parties and groups seek to promote Islamic laws and identities of their societies.

Post-uprisings Egyptian, Libyan and Tunisian constitutions prioritize Islamic religion as the principal source of law and values. Extra pressures for Islamization are created by the salafi groups, such as the Libyan Islamic Movement for Change or the Al-Nour Party in Egypt. This is what destabilizes the post-revolution political order by unleashing diverse and conflicting political forces who constantly jockey for power and influence.

No less damaging has been external interference in the spontaneous course of Arab pro-democracy movements. Great and regional powers have got dangerously enmeshed in the movements, either supporting or opposing the movements. UN Security Council Resolution 1973 legitimized NATO-led military intervention in Libya to promote democracy; it succeeded in bringing

down the Gaddafi regime on 20 October 2011 but raised new serious questions about the application of force to promote democracy in the name of 'theresponsibilityto protect'.

The French arms delivery to the rebel fighters in violation of Security Council Resolution 1970 that imposed arms embargos on all Libyan parties, and regime change through force, according to many observers, overstepped the powers and jurisdictions of the two Resolutions. The Russians and the Chinese subsequently used it to justify their decisions to veto similar resolutions on Syria to stifle the pro-democracy forces. The Arab Spring, in fact, created a new geopolitical arena for the great powers either to promote or preserve their national interests, real as well as perceived.

France became eager to spearhead the NATO military strikes on the Gaddafi regime once it secretly concluded coveted oil deals with the rebel National Transitional Council; the Russians would leave no stone untouched to safeguard their naval base in Syria's sea port Tartus and continue arms supplies to the Bashar Al-Assad government; and the Americans would support no action against their allies - the Bahraini Al-Khalifa rulers and Yemen's Ali Abdullah Saleh though they warranted Security Council interventions.

One notices with painful sadness that Arab democracy promotions did not genuinely figure in their interests calculations. Distressing internal developments and encumbering externalenvironmenttogether have retarded the normal course of the Arab Spring. It is beyond the imagination of many people that the Arab Spring is getting dried out so soon. The fates of past

great historical revolutions constantly remind us not to be too much optimistic about the glorious Arab pro-democracy movements.

The 1917 Russian socialist revolution lasted some seventy years what prompted the Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm to label the 20th century as ‘the short twentieth century’, the French Revolution soon unleashed a ‘Reign of Terror’ though normalcy returned after massive killings and bloodshed, and the 1979 Iranian Revolution soon found itself entangled in a long war with Iraq and then in shackles of sanctions imposed by the West. The Arab Spring is tied up by irresolvable internal politico-economic problems and unwelcome external involvements.

This is what is cutting short the life of the Arab Spring. The young Arab democratic forces are angry with post-uprisings developments, they lack the capacities to define and determine the course of their countries but are spirited enough to safeguard what they have achieved by overthrowing the dictators in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Yemen. That promises no return to the authoritarian past but, at the same time, guarantees no progressive actions to materialize the objectives of the pro-democracy revolutions to keep the Arab Spring alive for years or decades to come.