

The Pessoptimist's Arab Revolution: A Mismatch Between Social Evolution and Political Revolution

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ABSTRACT

The article argues that of the three structural problems of the Arab world, as enumerated in the UNDP Arab Human Development report, freedom, knowledge, and women's power deficit, the Arab Awakening has only tackled the first one, and with mixed results. The speed of social change has not matched that of political change. Firstly, the authoritarian model of government is still replicated in the society, especially in state sector institutions. Secondly, the notion of citizenship has not been sufficiently developed and the role of intellectuals in the Awakening has been less than expected. Thirdly, the social and political changes may both be slowed down or even reversed if the economic grievances of the Arab world persist. Lastly the article shows how ambiguous and multi-faceted the US's and the EU's reaction has been to the Arab Awakening.

Sa'id the Pessoptimist, a character created by Emil Habibi in his famous novel on the peculiar nature of the Palestinian existence, is a classic protagonist in Arabic literature. In the novel Sa'id did not discriminate between pessimism and optimism and saw this as a "blessing which separated his people from all others". This metaphor could easily apply to the whole Arab world. There was always a lot to cheer about and a lot to cry over in Sa'id's life, and this could be extended to what has happened in the Arab Awakening so far—the people have awoken but they're not yet up and running.

In the second year of the transformations in the Middle East it is high time to go beyond an analysis of the roots of the Arab uprisings and the overpowering enthusiasm to consider the scope and possible impediments to the current

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political transitions. In other words, to examine the relationship between political and social change. Has one preceded the other, or have they coincided? Will political developments beget a social transformation, or will social deficits impede—and possibly reverse—political progress? What has not changed?

The Larger Problems Continue

By examining the seven threats to human security in the Arab world, as enumerated in the UNDP's now famous 2009 *Arab Human Development Report*, and checking them against the current state of affairs, one can come to a conclusion that only one of those seven threats has lessened as a result of the Arab Awakening. Admittedly this test is rather simplistic, but it illustrates that authoritarian rule was only one of many visceral problems of the Arab world, and perhaps not even the most pressing one.

The first *Arab Human Development Report* in 2002 talked predominantly about three deficits: the freedom deficit, women's power deficit, and the knowledge deficit.¹ The 2009 report listed the seven threats to human security: 1) people and their insecure environment; 2) the state and its insecure people; 3) the vulnerability of those lost from sight; 4) volatile growth, high unemployment and persisting poverty; 5) hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity; 6) health security challenges; and 7) occupation and military intervention.²

The changes brought about by the Arab Awakening have focused on the

second threat (the state and its insecure people), but even the results here have been far from conclusive. The 2009 report said that citizens did not accept the state, which had not abided by international charters pertaining to human rights and abused its monopoly of the means of force with its coercion and power in general. The notion of citizenship was underdeveloped, and instead, a variety of smaller identities abounded. Social tensions partially originated in biased access to political power, wealth and representation. Behind the façade of lawful constitutions there were gaps between what the state claimed that it legally guaranteed and what it did in practice. Overall, some of these grievances have now eased: the Arab Awakening and the ensuing democratic elections in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the constitutional discussions in Tunisia, and the public participation in both Egypt and Tunisia have all formally legitimized power. But the most deep-rooted problems persist and debilitate the process of democratization and social modernization.

Other threats on the seven-point list show no sign of lessening, including the most important ones such as threats driven by population and demographic pressures, weak growth, unemployment, an inadequate educational system, inequalities, corruption, poverty, and environmental degradation. Undoubtedly no new government could have addressed such grave issues from day one, but political instability makes the new democratic leaders prone to popu-

lism rather than technocrat propensity. In these circumstances those in power stand little chance of giving a good example to their institutional subordinates or having effective oversight of their ministries and the still corrupt, authoritarian, lower-level or local institutions. These relations matter greatly if a real qualitative change is to be seen in the still authoritarian Arab society.

The Deep State and an Authoritarian Society

“In most parts of the Arab world, civil society (universities, the media, and culture, broadly speaking) has been swallowed up by political society, whose main form is the state.”³

Changing a country’s political system entails not only a transformation of the foundations of state institutions, it also requires a change in the mindset of people that make up those institutions. Such change rarely happens immediately following a revolution as the changes require a deeper, more profound social adaptation, which then emanates into people’s lives. Such is the case in most Arab countries—certainly in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The old state had corrupted society for decades. The behemoth gave power to those working for it, from the top down and the bottom up, from a countryside policeman to the minister of interior. In Poland, we know it all too well. During the communist period people would

bow to nurses, teachers, clerks, bringing them gifts, bribing them, and showing unnatural respect just to get things done. It continued for years after the democratic transition in 1989. Ideally, a new attitude requires abandoning the deeply engrained arrogance and authoritarianism on every institutional level in favor of a sense of service for society. Like in Egypt, as in Syria and most Arab countries, the amount of *wasta*, connections or vitamin “w”, a person has dictates how they will be treated by a governmental official. Clerks use their privileged positions to wield power in the most minor of cases. A different, more customer-friendly mindset settles in slowly in state institutions, not simultaneously with political changes. This new mindset requires strong examples from supervisors and explicit repetition of the new rules. Corruption, however, impedes this process as people have

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grown accustomed to reaping additional benefits from poorly-paid public sector positions and giving them up immediately is close to impossible. So how deep does the state run?

“The high-employment rate in the state sector has always been a method for the regime to secure its power. However, this patronage system has led

to a broadly inefficient public administration, in which employment is not necessarily based on skill but on loyalty. State institutions are disconnected from citizens' needs and operate beyond democratic control."⁴

In Egypt, the epitome of the Awakening, the state runs deep and wide.

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The notion of a "deep state" has only recently been applied to Egypt, but in its original sense it assumes the existence of an influential group of people, from the military, intelligence, judiciary, or big business, who *de facto* run the state from the background.⁵ In Egypt it has been used to describe those elites that have remained impervious to the changes brought about by the fall of Mubarak, mostly the military who has been in power ever since, and the judiciary who has collaborated with the ruling elites. Those actions are driven by fear of losing their grip on power and money. Even though the concept might be valid in such a narrow meaning it makes even more sense to spread it to all state institutions. Overall, there is significant over-employment in the civil service with more than 6 million people working in the state sector. That group (roughly 8 percent of society) in its entirety is determined to maintain their tiny, local-scale privileges. Those clerks

do not readily welcome change. Together with the potent institutional decision makers they are the real deep state that runs not only vertically, throughout the bureaucratic strata, but also horizontally in each and every village.

"The regimes—even the most unpopular ones—are products of the societies they govern and to grasp the nature of the problem we have to start by looking at society's building blocks. While presidents and kings hog the limelight, their style of government is replicated in countless other situations: in factories, offices, schools and homes."⁶

Brian Whitaker's words mirror those of the renowned psychologist and sociologist Erich Fromm in his book *Escape from Freedom* (1941), a seminal book in the development of the social sciences, and which clearly applies to the Arab Awakening. Fromm's general thesis is that freedom is so alienating and demanding that initially people would rather escape into authoritarian, safe, predictable and stable systems. Based on Fromm's premise one could assume that such an abrupt supply of freedom in the Middle East could yield an "escape from it." The social change in the Arab world needed to bring about a qualitative difference in the functioning of state institutions has yet to arrive, and can be further delayed by a particular family model where individual liberties give way to community values. Brian Whitaker claims that family in that sense may be the microcosm of the authoritarian



A woman walks past graffiti showing December 17 clashes along Mohamed Mahmoud street near Tahrir Square in Cairo.

society with the father as a ruler, along with the tender but silent mother and subdued children.⁷ The family model is not only described by scientists and journalists, it can also be seen in numerous Arab literary works.⁸

However, there are signs that the needed social change might be coming or perhaps has already started. Indeed, the Awakening would have not been possible without the politicization and emancipation of the youth who could ignite the generational change mainly because of their connection to the globalized outside world—their politicization was the straw that broke the camel's back. Likewise at the beginning of the 19th century when the first Arab

Nahda started, Napoleon's invasion and the bewilderment at what Europe had achieved had awakened the Arab world. Following this 19th century awakening, technological and social modernization, together with a national Arab awareness, began to emerge. It took people of great vision and courage like Muhammad Abduh or Khayr ad-Din at-Tunsi to channel the social energy in the right direction. But then again social change did not catch up with politics. New postcolonial nation states were created in the first half of the 20th century before an adequate sense of national identity could develop and they have been lacking in both citizens and visionaries ever since.

Absent Citizens and Intellectuals

The sense of citizenship may only be developing with the current political changes, but social process will be long and gradual. The primary identity in many Arab countries stems from the family, the clan, the tribe. Such predisposition does not have a negative normative value in itself, but in an autocratic system and combined with weak considerations for “the other” as part of a broader and common entity called the nation or the state it reduces citizenship awareness. Understandably there has been little sense of a person’s responsibility for their country, their local environment, or for their surroundings. After all even now in the most vocal pro-

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change country, Qatar, there has never been a free election in its entire history and just one referendum. Citizens have been rarely asked for their opinions and as a result they have rarely cared for their state and country. A sense of citizenship is another social gain that most probably will be slowly developing over the next few decades, especially since similar visionaries to the 19th century Arab intellectuals are not leading the way in the Arab Awakening.

In stark contrast to the revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989

and 1990 the most prominent secularist intellectuals are absent from the scene in the Middle East. The revolutions and transitions lack an intellectual Arab conscience, with the possible exception of one of the most well-known Egyptian writers, Alaa al-Aswany, who engages in the public debate on safeguarding the revolution while at the same time trying to stay out of mainstream politics.

However, possibly the most prominent contemporary Arab poet Adonis is rather undecided on what his opinions should be about the events in his motherland Syria, perhaps a prudent attitude, but Adonis has even not indicated his thoughts when asked. There are two reasons behind the absence of intellectuals in the Awakening. On the one hand the younger Arab generation may associate them with the previous era, with their parents’ plight, and with, among other events, the 1967 failure. On the other hand, the 2011 revolutions have lacked

strong personalities in general, as if that popular uprising was in fact an amalgam of very different interest groups’ smaller uprisings which could not find a universal enough leader.

Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, one of the best-known Arab philosophers, concluded in April 2011 that “On the other hand, the intellectual plays an even more important role in societies with a high rate of illiteracy. Not because he’s especially important or his thinking is particularly profound, but because his significance must be viewed in proportion to the

education and culture of his environment.”⁹

The role of intellectuals then—not just those in the limelight but also local, educated people—is all the more important in countries with underdeveloped educational systems. A 2008 World Bank study¹⁰ showed that pupils in Arab schools learn by rote the answers to questions they already know the teacher will ask, and most of the time they just copy what is written on the blackboard. The educational systems reward those who copy well, not those who think creatively, thereby reproducing control and submission. As a result, the level of analytical research and innovation is low. According to a global go-to think-tank survey¹¹ there are around 300 think-tanks in the Middle East and North Africa region, a hundred of which are in Israel, Turkey and Iran, leaving 200 in Arab countries. By comparison France alone has close to 200 think-tanks and the UK has almost 300. Needless to say, education and research first and foremost require funds.

A Democracy that Cannot Deliver Will Not Last

Across the board, the Arab street is mostly preoccupied with who will rule their countries, not so much how, a situation which in a transitional period is understandable but detrimental to the real state of affairs. Many of the cur-

rent grievances—for example unemployment and inequality—are due to the pitiful state of the economy. A democracy that cannot deliver economically will not last. Unfortunately a period of

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populist politics is seemingly starting in Egypt and elsewhere, reinforcing the preoccupation for political games rather than real work. Responsible politicians should know better, but in the end they generally acquiesce to the general street mood.

Before the Awakening, Egypt, for example, was among the so-called CIVETS countries (Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey, and South Africa), the second-tier of rising powers after the BRIC countries (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Even during the economic crisis, the Egyptian economy grew by 5 percent annually. After the fall of Mubarak, investments began to flow out of the country and economic growth plunged to 0.3 percent in the second half of 2011. Standard and Poor's credit rating for Egypt dropped from “BB” to “B”. The fear of losing popularity drove the transitional administration into short-term action rather than developing a long-term economic strategy. In fiscal year 2011/2012, the

amount of government subsidies (mainly food and fuel) rose by 42 percent while state salaries increased by 27 percent, adding to an already substantial budget deficit and shrinking foreign reserves to \$15 billion (from \$35 billion).

In the current budget (2012/2013) that was presented to parliament for approval, the deficit will reach \$23 billion, which amounts to 10 percent of Egypt's GDP, while more than 75 percent of budgetary spending will be eaten up by subsidies, salaries for the six million-strong civil services, and debt service payments. Securing adequate funds while the deficit is growing and reserves are contracting will not be possible without outside help. The fundamental challenge for the new govern-

countries in transition will not be able to cope without outside help. The West clearly thinks it is in its best interest to closely monitor developments in the Middle East but can it really help?

An Inadequate International Response

"It is not cultural or dynastic legacies but this modern formation, and the links of this formation to external structures of military, economic and political power, that explain the character of contemporary Middle Eastern states."¹²

The moment that the Arab Awakening started Europe and the US reacted to it with fear and uncertainty rather than with joy. More than a year and a half later, after hundreds of policy papers on how these changes are positive and welcome, this fact tends to be overlooked. There has been no universal response

to the Arab Awakening by the international community—in fact it has been mixed. The US has principally tried to grasp the opportunity to present itself as a supporter of Arab democracy. The EU has admitted its failures and embarked on a new partnership and is willing to support the transforming states. Within the EU, however, some states have had different ideas on how to react to Islamists winning elections or for calls for more liberalized trade with the region.

Not only do the responses vary from state to state but also among different societal groups within a state. There is

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ment will be to secure those funds, curb economic deficiencies, and counterbalance the negative long-term trends.

The way forward for the Arab countries in transition is undoubtedly economic growth, although ways of increasing this growth remain uncertain. The world economy is in recession, and so is the largest trading partner of the Arab countries, the European Union (EU). With large portions of state budgets consumed by public sector salaries, debt payments, and subsidies on food and fuel, and with continued instability and investors leaving the country, the

the political view (the need to be on the right side of history), the military view (the need to ensure stability and security and to prepare for the worst), and the people's view (to support the underdog and revolution). In reality some EU politicians have openly supported the Freedom and Justice Party and other moderate Islamist parties, and European societies have clearly placed their sympathies in the young revolutionaries who did not want to get involved in current politics. The American military, on the other hand, has seemed to have been silently rooting for the Egyptian army.

The recent anti-American protests in the Arab world have patently proved that the West has been losing influence in the transitional Arab states. The governments of these new revolutionary regimes will inevitably respond to popular sentiment, which expects the new authorities to formulate a more independent foreign policy. This does not mean, however, severing ties with Israel or becoming instantly friendly with Iran, the arguments that were made by the former regimes to gain legitimacy for their rule internally and internationally.

If there is anything that the transitional Arab countries need from the international community it is perhaps financial aid. Last year the Deauville partnership—the G8 and international organizations—offered Egypt \$20 billion in aid. The pledge only covers political and economic reform projects, and according to the donors those projects have not yet been implemented. In effect, financial aid is not forthcom-

ing, and any that is cannot be spent, for example, on foreign debt service payments, which totals nearly \$35 billion (10.2 percent of it is to Germany, 10.9 percent to France, and 9.3 percent to North America). If an agreement with the IMF is reached, Egypt could apply for negotiations with the Paris Club on debt relief. Even though the results of any debt relief may only be felt in the long run, the EU and the US should encourage Egypt to pursue these negotiations, but if it is unable to meet the criteria they should offer debt relief on a bilateral basis. The same applies to other Arab countries in economic difficulties, notably Yemen.

A Pessoptimist's Conclusion

In the past decade the visceral, deep-rooted problems of Arab countries have increased. The UNDP points to the fragile political, social, economic and ecological structures; the lack of human-centered policies; and the vulnerability to foreign intervention. None of these three problems has gone away as a result of the Awakening but it would be naïve to expect that. It is valid to assume though that these lingering problems will continue to negatively impact the Arab world. They keep social discontent high while the new, democratic governments attend to their political headaches rather than tackle these problems. Additionally, changes in social behavior at work, at home and in the streets are not going fast enough and lag behind political change.

However, in times of more political-ly empowered individuals and a global intifada, it goes without saying that finally the Arabs have awoken as well—not only did they stand up to the state authorities, but sons and daughters to their fathers and grandfathers, women to men, employees to employers, the smaller ones to the bigger—a change will last decades. As the Egyptian saying goes, “*dawam al-hal min al-muhal*” (“continuing the same is impossible”).

Endnotes

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