

The Middle East is in Transition—to What?

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ABSTRACT

The Arab world has been changed irreversibly by the popular uprisings that started in early 2011. The long period of dormancy that enveloped the Arab world has come to an end. The uprisings have been triggered in all countries by similar mixes of economic hardship and lack of civil and political rights. But we should not expect the uprisings to lead to similar changes in all countries. Already, three different patterns are emerging. In Tunisia and Egypt, the presidents have been overthrown by members of their own regime, including the military; they are now trying to limit the extent of change and to transform a potentially revolutionary process into one of reform from the top. In Yemen and Libya, the challenge to the leaders has turned into a challenge to the survival of the state itself: the two countries have no institutions that can persist if the presidents are ousted. In other countries affected by protest, the regimes have been trying to subdue the protest through a mixture of populist concessions, cautious reforms introduced from the top, and the occasional use of force.

Since the beginning of 2011, the Arab world has changed irreversibly. A region politically frozen for decades has begun to stir under the pressure of its own citizens. Popular discontent has led to the ousting of long-time presidents in Tunisia and Egypt. It has shaken the position of President Saleh in Yemen to the point that few believe he can survive and has convinced President Qaddafi in Libya that he can only survive politically by waging war—with tanks, planes and heavy artillery—on his own citizens. In Bahrain, the Shia population, representing the majority in the Sunni-ruled country, has been trying to wrest concessions from the king, demanding a constitutional monarchy or even the elimination of the monarchical system.

These are just the most dramatic cases. In other countries as well popular unrest is rife, forcing governments into making unprecedented concessions. In Jordan, the king has fired the entire cabinet and appointed a new

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prime minister supposedly charged with implementing reforms. In Iraq, unrest is shaking the fragile government to the extent it may not survive, as political parties in the governing coalition accuse each other of neglecting the needs of the population. In Kurdistan, unrest has shaken the tenuous alliance among the

Kurdish parties, and the only common ground Kurds can find at present—their nationalism—has increased tension in and around the disputed city of Kirkuk from chronic to acute. In Morocco, there have been only a few incidents of protest, but the king is sufficiently worried about the possibility of an uprising that he announced the constitution will be amended, increasing the power of the parliament and requiring the king to name as prime minister the leader of the political party that has gained the largest number of votes in elections. Even usually sleepy Oman has experienced its share of demonstrations, although they have been rather sedate and polite affairs—with most protesters apparently even breaking off for the weekend; nevertheless, the unrest has prompted the sultan not only to try and buy off protesters with money and jobs, but also to dismiss more and more cabinet members and to announce that much more power will be transferred to a new parliament, at least part of which will be elected.

A few countries are still untouched by large-scale protest. In Saudi Arabia and Syria, security services have so far succeeded in stopping attempts to organize a “day of rage.” In Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, nobody has stirred so far. In Kuwait, the chronically unstable political situation does not appear worse than usual, and the government has moved quickly to decrease the potential for trouble by announcing large payments for everybody. Lebanon remains mired in its own internal political stalemate, rooted in the reality of a sectarian system which has so far remained impervious to change. Yet, even in the countries that have remained calm, nobody is saying “it cannot happen here.” Governments in particular are taking measures to buy off discontent with economic concessions and to stifle it with tighter security.

No country in the Middle East has experienced a revolution so far, and it is quite possible, indeed probable, that none will in the foreseeable future. There has not been a complete change in the governing elite nor has the socio-economic order been turned on its head. But the change is nevertheless irreversible in most countries. The Arab street has spoken loud and clear: governments cannot continue taking their citizens for granted nor can they view them as docile,

apathetic, and easily manipulated. The Arab public is becoming conscious of their rights and most importantly they have discovered that they have power as well. To be sure, not everybody welcomes the changes taking place. After the initial stunned silence that followed the onset of protest, people who benefited from the status quo, or at least felt reasonably secure within it, are beginning to push back against the protesters. But even the “counterrevolutionaries,” as some in Egypt are calling the defenders of the status quo, are contributing to the new climate of political activism that is changing the political face of the Middle East. Instant democracy is highly unlikely, but Middle Eastern countries, politically frozen for decades, are moving again.

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Common Underlying Conditions Led to Protest

Protest in all Arab countries is rooted in similar conditions: a demographic structure dominated by the very young, making it very difficult for any country to provide for the educational opportunities and jobs they need; high unemployment rates for everybody, but particularly for the young; a high level of poverty in all but the richest oil-producing countries; and governments that are not only undemocratic but seemingly incapable of understanding that the changing nature of their societies and economies requires them to formulate new policies.

Demographic conditions around the Arab world are dramatic. Youths aged 15-24 represent more than one third of the total population.¹ Birth rates have been declining, with the total fertility rate (average number of children born per women) declining from approximately seven in 1960 to three in 2006.² Nevertheless, the population in the Middle East and North Africa region is projected to rise from 432 million in 2007 to 692 million by 2050.³ It is exceedingly difficult for the labor market to absorb such a staggering number of new entrants, particularly if they are educated enough to aspire to more than just menial jobs but are not qualified enough for the available skilled jobs. This leads to the paradox of oil-producing countries having to employ tens of thousands of foreign workers even as unemployment rates are growing.⁴ Making matters worse, neo-liberal reform in most countries has led to a growing and visible disparity between the living conditions of the rich and those of the majority of the population.

The malaise created by difficult economic conditions and the lack of prospects for young people—the age of marriage is increasing everywhere because so many



Photo: EPA

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young people cannot find jobs or afford housing—is worsened by the perception that the political leaders and the new business class are corrupt. Most Arab countries score quite high on the corruption perception index published by Transparency International. On a 1-10 scale where 1 indicates the highest level of corruption, the scores of Arab countries range from Iraq’s dismal 1.5 to Qatar’s relatively strong 7.7. Most fall below 5, which indicates serious levels of corruption.⁵

The final ingredient in the mix of factors that underpin the explosion of discontent in the region has been the governments’ lack of flexibility and responsiveness. The problem goes beyond the “deficit of democracy” denounced and analyzed by the series of Arab Human Development Reports published by the United Nations Development Program beginning in 2002. Even authoritarian governments can be dynamic and innovative in some areas, as South Korea and Taiwan showed in the 1970s and China is showing now. But many Arab governments were simply static.

Outcomes will be Different in Each Country

Although the causes of discontent are remarkably similar everywhere, the outcome is likely to differ considerably from country to country both in the depth

and type of change. In all countries the protests were sparked and sustained initially by youth networks with little or no organizational structure and recognizable leadership. The outcomes, however, are going to be determined by the emergence of a leadership and organizations, as well as by the way in which the former regimes manage to reorganize and reassert themselves in order to contain change. Conditions have created the protest but the outcome in each country will depend on politics; in other words, on how effectively different groups organize themselves to preserve what they have or to obtain what they want. This political battle, most visible at this point in Egypt and Tunisia, is pitting opposition forces that are by and large politically inexperienced and divided against the remnants of the old regime that have honed their political skills during their decades in power. This political battle is overwhelmingly a domestic one, but other countries will try to influence the outcome, and are likely to weigh in on the side of limited reform implemented from the top rather than on the side of deeper and thus more open-ended and less predictable transformation.

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Three patterns have emerged so far in the battle for change triggered by the protest:

- In Tunisia and Egypt, the regime has forced the president and top officials to resign in order to save itself, and is now engaged in a political battle with both the protesters and the emerging organized political parties and alliances. This battle will determine whether democracy emerges or whether the two countries sink back into a form of benign semi-authoritarianism.⁶
- In Yemen and Libya, the leaders are still in control and are fighting back aggressively to prevent the protesters from prevailing. The leaders have been able to cling to power not only because they are ruthless in putting down the protests, but also because their power is so personal that there are no regime institutions to force them to resign to save the rest of the regime. If Qaddafi loses the battle for survival, the entire regime will collapse. In Egypt, the military establishment that underpinned Mubarak for three decades could easily survive the demise of the president and in fact engineered that demise in order to protect itself.

- In other countries affected by protest, the regimes have been trying to subdue the protest through a mixture of populist concessions, cautious reforms introduced from the top, and the occasional use of force. It is still unclear how far the regimes are willing to go in the direction of reform and whether they will turn to repression instead.

Egypt exemplifies the first pattern. President Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign by the military, extremely reluctantly as his February 10 non-resignation speech indicated. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a council of senior military officers appointed by Mubarak, disbanded the parliament, left in place the cabinet appointed by Mubarak after the protests started, and announced that it would govern the country for an interim period of six months, guiding the country to new presidential and parliamentary elections and then surrendering power. The SCAF left no doubt about two things: it would return power to civilians as soon as possible and it would govern the way it wanted in the interim. It thus proceeded to appoint a commission of jurists to amend the constitution to make possible the holding of competitive parliamentary elections, instructed them on which articles to amend, and set a date for a referendum on the amendments, all without discussions or consultation. To the extent it did consult with the opposition, it was in the context of continuing demonstrations and also following a divide-and-rule approach toward the opposition, for example meetings with youth protesters but not with well-known opposition figures. The SCAF, a part of the old regime, still governed from the top, without serious consultation, the way the regime had always done. The main difference with the past was that the SCAF understood the necessity of introducing at least limited change, while Mubarak had not.

But the SCAF was not able to adhere to its initial plan. Protest continued and the military had to respond—something had indeed changed irreversibly in Egypt. The military council dismissed some ministers, arrested some particularly corrupt individuals, held more consultations, eventually dismissed the cabinet and appointed a new one more acceptable to the protesters. But the picture was clear: the SCAF as the embodiment of the old regime would only depart from its “command and control” approach if pushed hard by the opposition. The opposition in turn was finding it difficult to move from street action against Mubarak to forming political organizations capable of pressing the SCAF for deeper change and to participate effectively in the elections. The more complex the tasks became—elaborating a strategy for change, deciding on how soon elections should be held, forming political parties, and rallying behind leaders rather than relying on informal networks to bring crowds into the streets—the more divided

the opposition became, something which played into the hands of the SCAF.

It is undoubtedly still early days in the process of transformation and it is far too early to predict how far it will go. It is clear that the old regime still has a lot of life in it and has experience on its side. The opposition also has a lot of life and determination, but it lacks political experience and cohesion. At present, it is probably a tie. The old regime also has probably more international support than the opposition, not a decisive factor, but not one that can be disregarded. Arab regimes, unhappy at the overthrow of Mubarak, look more favorably at the SCAF than at the crowds in the streets. In the United States and Europe, protesters have captivated the imagination of the general publics, but governments are leery of opposition groups they do not know and of the possible ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood and of Islamists in general. The military, on the other hand, is a reassuring presence, a known entity that cooperated in the past in the war against terrorism and represents continuity.

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Libya exemplifies the second pattern. There, the leader is the entire regime. In his 40 years in power, Qaddafi dismantled all institutions in the already weakly institutionalized country. He governed through a network of ad hoc committees, militias and military units tied directly to him. They are too divided among themselves to depose him and in any case, if he falls, they fall with him. Thus, there is nobody in Libya to do what the SCAF did in Egypt, namely getting rid of the president to protect the regime. Deposing Qaddafi is up to the protesters alone. Unfortunately, what started as an uprising by civilians seeking to use the power of their numbers has now turned into a confrontation between two military forces, fighting a conventional war, in which the anti-government forces are at a serious disadvantage—even the imposition of a no-fly zone might not change the balance. Furthermore, the fact that Qaddafi's supporters would not survive politically without him provides them with a powerful incentive to fight on his side. The removal of the leader is thus proving much more difficult than in Egypt and Tunisia

The third pattern, that of regimes introducing reform from the top to defuse protest, has not emerged anywhere yet, although it may be a matter of time before it does, probably in a country with a monarchical system. Monarchies, particularly those enjoying a degree of historical legitimacy, as in Morocco, have the option

of protecting their own longevity by surrendering some of their power to the parliament. The Moroccan king, Mohammed VI, has indicated recently that he might move in that direction, as already mentioned. It would not necessarily be a sudden move toward the full-fledged, contemporary European constitutional monarchies in which the king rules but does not govern. Reform might take the form of a cautious increase in the power of the parliament. Whether such slow movement would defuse demands for more radical change depends on whether the reforms are introduced early enough, before crowds in the streets start making demands for radical change. For example, it may be too late for the king of Bahrain to increase the power of the parliament only slightly, although this might work in Morocco. And there is always the possibility that a sovereign's attempt to stay ahead of popular demands in order to control the transition will have the opposite effect of encouraging the public to demand more—the problem Samuel Huntington described as “the king's dilemma.”⁷ On the other hand, inaction is also dangerous.

No matter what path different countries will follow, political change will continue in Arab countries. There will undoubtedly be set backs, as in Libya, but the stultifying stagnation that has prevailed for decades will not return to the same degree. Yet, Arab countries are still a long way from democracy. Electoral democracies and semi-authoritarian regimes are likely to emerge as the dominant political form in the Middle East, as they did in much of the post-Soviet world after the end of the Cold War. And no matter the future political arrangements, Arab countries will continue to face the challenges of the difficult economic and demographic realities that helped trigger the uprisings. Still, the Middle East will be a much changed region.

Endnotes

1. United Nations Development Programme, 2010.
2. Population Reference Bureau, “Fertility Declining in the Middle East and North Africa,” April, 2008, retrieved from <http://www.prb.org/Articles/2008/menafertilitydecline.aspx>.
3. Ibid.
4. Total enrollment in secondary education rose by 25 percent from 1999 to 2005 while enrollment in higher education rose by 31 percent in the same period. Education For All Global Monitoring Report 2008, UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0015/001572/157267e.pdf>. In 2008, youth literacy (ages 15-24) stood at 89 percent, *World Bank*.
5. Transparency International, “Corruption Perceptions Index 2010,” 2010.
6. Marina Ottaway, *Democracy Challenged: The Rise of Semi-Authoritarianism* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2003).
7. Samuel Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).