

PART I

Regional Overview

Rulers, Regimes, and Regions: the Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World

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In little over a year, the politics of the Arab world has changed dramatically.¹ What seemed to have been an unrelieved landscape of authoritarian regimes has become a complex panorama of considerable diversity and vitality. How did this diversity arise from apparent uniformity? And what are the prospects for democracy in the region?

For decades those who study the Middle East have puzzled over the persistence of authoritarianism in the Arab world. In trying to establish why the region seemed so different from the rest of the world, however, they neglected the extent to which the countries of the region differ among themselves. Yet, even if it is true that

¹ This essay is based on a lecture delivered on January 31, 2012 at IDE and subsequently revised in April 2012. Elements of these arguments have been presented elsewhere, including in lectures at the London School of Economics and at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul, and are scheduled to be published in volume on the Arab spring to be edited by Fawaz Gerges. I am grateful for the comments of all who have contributed in these discussions.

democracy is the future of the world, exactly how individual countries will traverse the path from authoritarianism to free, transparent and accountable government will depend quite a bit on their starting points.

The Arab Uprising of 2011 thus not only gives us an opportunity to celebrate the first genuine efforts at democratization in the Arab world but also provides an occasion to examine how various kinds of authoritarian regimes shape transitions to democracy. Common causes—widespread protests—have already produced very different effects—very varied government responses; what accounts for those difference, and why have some regimes survived while others succumbed to the popular protest?

Part of our failure to distinguish between different kinds of authoritarian regimes is a result of our analytical confusion of rulers, their regimes, and the states they govern. In highlighting the individual rulers—Qaddafi of Libya, Mubarak of Egypt, Assad of Syria, or Kings Abdallah of Saudi Arabia and Hassan of Morocco, for example—we have failed to look carefully at the nature of the polities they lead. Their *regimes*—the set of rules and norms that regulate the operation of government and its interactions with society, including how the rulers are selected—are quite different. All of the regimes about which we are concerned are designed to regulate the government of a modern *state*—that is, a political unit whose administration is acknowledged by its population to have the right to use violence to enforce law and order—but the integrity and capacity of the states of the Middle East also varies considerably.

Morocco, for example, has been a relatively stable state for centuries, recognized, if sometimes grudgingly, by those who live there for its monopoly of the legitimate use of force. Its regime is a monarchy, and its government is selected by the king, whose right to rule is by virtue of his birth. Saudi Arabia, by

contrast, is a state defined—as you can tell by its name—by a family, and whether it is the family or a separable state that upholds a claim to police the country is not altogether clear. Egypt has been enjoyed a strong, coherent state identity for centuries, while Libya is a political creation of the mid-twentieth century, and these differences shaped the capacity and character of their military-backed regimes.

Modern democracy assumes that the state itself is not a matter of contention, and in North America and Europe—and Japan—that is by and large a reasonable assumption. In the Arab world, however, as the Saudi and Libyan instances suggests, the state as the organizing principle of politics is not uncontested. The Syrian Ba’th Party’s continuing rhetorical attachment to Arab nationalism, the ongoing ambiguity of the status of Palestine (and hence of the states in which large numbers of Palestinians live), and the refusal of the former Libyan ruler to acknowledge his status as a head of state—he was, as he insisted, the leader of a revolution—all illustrate in various ways the continuing disputes about the state and its representatives in the region.

Moreover, the impact of the region itself—what is sometimes called the “neighborhood” or “contagion” effect—is also important in shaping the domestic developments. As the first year after the “Arab Spring” drew to a close, it was apparent that the regional dynamics were more intricate than merely the contagion of revolutionary enthusiasm that had seemed so powerful only months earlier. In fact regional interventions (or withheld interventions) were becoming increasingly visible as factors, indeed sometimes decisive elements, in the trajectories and outcomes of the transitions in the region. The debates about whether the international intervention in Libya represented a precedent for Syria illustrated the complexity and importance of regional and international dynamics.

What does this mean for the prospects of democracy in the Arab world today? Let us look at what has taken place in more detail.

Starting in mid-December of 2010, when a Tunisian vegetable vendor set himself on fire in frustration at government harassment, almost every country in the Arab world has seen protests. The vendor's act was copied in Algeria, Jordan and Egypt; peaceful demonstrations, marches and rallies, starting with protests against corruption, police brutality and high food prices, escalated to calls for changes of policies in Saudi Arabia and Oman, of governments in Jordan, Morocco and Bahrain, and ultimately of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria—virtually no country was exempt, and no government unscathed. By mid-June, the governments of Algeria and Saudi Arabia had announced major infusions of money, including across-the-board wage increases, the cabinets in Jordan and Morocco had been sacked, the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia had fallen, Libya had slid into civil war, Yemen was in limbo after the evacuation of the president for medical treatment after he was injured in an assassination attempt; Syria was confronting a brutal crackdown by its own government.

Clearly, the people of the Arab world were not content with their governments, and there were certainly common themes in all of these upheavals.

The new information and communications technologies, especially the social media, were important in fueling and disseminating the protests. They permitted access to information about the way people live elsewhere in the world, and they permitted organization and communication among protesters within and beyond the borders of each country. Perhaps more subtly, these technologies also empowered a generation who are more tech-savvy and therefore in some ways more knowledgeable and authoritative than their parents. The impatience and frustration of these young people at being unable to use the information they can

access, and assume the responsibilities for which they are prepared, goes a long way to explain why millions of young people continue to militate for more open, transparent and accountable government.

Thus, although in many places, economic grievances played an important role in the early mobilizations, by and large these were liberal, participatory revolts; they are demands for citizenship. The nearly universally complacent, unresponsive and often contemptuous policies of the governments produced a nearly universal response: demands for effective citizenship, personal agency and government accountability. Hence the remarkable accent on dignity.

If there are common elements, however, there have been very different trajectories and, already, very different outcomes in the “Arab Uprisings.” Why?

Thus far, among those regimes that have survived, two, possibly three, characteristics seem to have contributed to their resilience.

1. Governments that control large revenues have been able to diffuse or control opposition. Governments in rentier states, such as the large oil and gas exporting countries of the region, for example, may distribute resources to both bolster acquiescence and strengthen coercion, thereby surviving political protest. This was the approach for regimes as otherwise diverse as Saudi Arabia, Algeria and Oman. Obviously, however, Libya’s counter-example suggests this cannot be the only factor.

2. Timing is important: quick, decisive responses to protestors’ demands enhanced the prospect for regime survival. Had the rulers of Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya responded more quickly, and made the concessions they ultimately made even a week or so earlier, all four would probably still be in office. The relative

alacrity of the responses of the kings of Jordan, Morocco and Oman in sacking their cabinets and promising further reforms seems to have staved off, and possibly diffused altogether, more serious calls for the downfall of the regime.

3. Monarchy may be a useful device by which rulers can distance themselves from the failings of their policies, salvaging the regime by dismissing the government. This seems to explain the ability of the kings of Morocco, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Oman to weather protests that capsized presidents elsewhere, although the Algerian government's success suggests that the first two factors—the availability of government resources and the agility of the rulers—may be more powerful factors.

But what of the regimes that fell, or seem to be collapsing? How do we account for the relative ease with which the Egyptians and Tunisians were able to slip out from under their governments to begin building new regimes, while the Libyans and Yemenis fought long and still inconclusive civil wars, and the Syria's citizens face a brutal onslaught from their own rulers.

This leads us to another set of propositions, which link the regime not simply to its revenues, rulers and rationale but with the state over which it presides.

4. In countries where the state is strong, discarding the regime is relatively unthreatening—no Egyptian or Tunisian worried that his country would be dismembered or his right to live in his country would be challenged were the president to resign or the constitution to be rewritten.

5. In countries where the state is weak—where the legitimacy of its policing powers is widely contested—regime change entails state collapse. Thus, the breakdown of the regime in Libya, where very few citizens feel an affinity for the

state—as opposed to their region, family, tribe or sect—triggered a collapse of the state itself. This in turn has provoked political opportunism and alliance-building that will inhibit rapid rebuilding. Similarly, in Yemen, the fall of the regime threatens to remove the principal device by which the country’s tribes negotiated their relations/

6. In countries where the project of the regime *is* state-building, the identity of the regime is closely tied to that of the state itself. Therefore, efforts to dislodge the regime are interpreted as a challenge to the state itself. Here the regime and its allies have built at least some elements of a modern infrastructure, and some of the citizenry acknowledge the legitimacy of the national army and public administration. Unlike the regimes in strong states, however, the military is loyal not to the state, but to the regime which has built that state, and regime supporters have a great deal to lose should the government fall and the state building project be reversed. Hence, fortified by strong domestic supporters, they are likely to be quite brutal in suppressing opposition—as we see in Syria (and, I would argue, we saw in Algeria in the 1990s).

7. The weaker the state, the more likely foreign intervention. This can be decisive, and can support or weaken a regime, depending on the interests of the intervening power. From the NATO intervention in support of the Libyan rebellion to the Saudi support of the regime in Bahrain, transnational actors have been important in determining the outcome of protests against the Arab governments, particularly where the state is weak, and this is likely to continue.

Indeed, the regional involvement and implications were quite complex, and the regional dynamics suggested that there are several sorts of “neighborhood effects” on political stability and change. Four hypotheses suggest themselves.

8. At the outset, a “protected place in space and time” is useful.

As the first to move, Tunisia—or rather the opponents to the Ben Ali regime--benefitted from what Charles Tilly once described in a different context as “a protected place in time and space.”² Although Tunisia was a staunch and useful ally to Europe and the United States in the war on terror, it was not in the larger scheme of things very important, and as the war on terror itself began to lose steam, international investment in Tunisia’s military and security cooperation lessened. Hence, when the uprisings began, none of Ben Ali’s foreign patrons were prepared to support him against what was largely a peaceful civilian uprising. Had Tunisia played a more important strategic role in regional politics, the regime might have been able to call in reinforcements. The armed services had been bent almost entirely to domestic security--Ben Ali himself came from the police—and while the army played an important role in refusing to support the regime, it did not participate meaningfully in managing the transition. This conviction that the military itself—and its external allies--had little to lose in a regime change was no doubt conveyed to those with whom Tunisia enjoyed “security cooperation.”

9. As time goes on, demonstration effects and political pressure for political change can be powerful, particularly when they do not jeopardize military cooperation.

Egypt’s subsequent upheaval created far more serious challenges for both regional and international actors. For the US, Obama’s speech in Cairo almost two years earlier had been, if nothing else, virtually a clarion call for exactly the kind of opposition that had developed, which made the US position in support of Mubarak after the protests broke out exceptionally difficult. Having said that he had “an

² Charles, Tilly, ed., *The Formation of National States in Western Europe* (Princeton University Press, 1975)

unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.”³—and having supported regime change in Tunisia, Obama was in a difficult position.

The carefully calibrated intervention of the army reflected the continuing power of a military establishment honed in equal parts of patronage and patriotism and as the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took control of the state after Mubarak’s departure, they revealed the enormous weight of the armed services in Egypt. They also revealed that they would not abandon longstanding cooperation with the US and its regional allies, notably Israel. Run by generals who earned their stripes in the 1967 and 1973 wars and whose military cooperation with the United States after the Camp David Peace Treaty with Israel, has been intense, intimate, and sustained. The inability of Mubarak’s political circles to respond deftly to the challenges of the protests, combined with the US’s evident willingness to deal with the military leadership directly, sealed the willingness of the SCAF’s to follow their Tunisian counterpart’s approach and sacrifice the regime for their own good and that of their country.

10. Money becomes increasingly important, but it can be spent for a variety of purposes.

As the spring wore on, upheavals in Libya, Yemen and Bahrain captured attention but only one of them produced regime change. In all three, however, two GGC states played important and contradictory roles. Beginning in Bahrain and extending to Yemen, Saudi Arabia made it clear that it would not brook serious upheaval on its borders. Saudi troops were sent into Bahrain directly, and while they might entertain a symbolic change in the head of state in Yemen at some less heated juncture, the Saudis quite pointedly returned the recuperating Ali Abdallah Saleh to Sanaa from his medical treatment following an assassination attempt as soon as he was well enough to travel. The Saudis did not look kindly on genuine popular participation in government anywhere on the Arabian Peninsula.

Qatar, by contrast, had welcomed the change in regime in Egypt, having had testy relations with the Mubarak government for some time, and actively supported the rebellion in Libya. Although the NATO intervention received much more international attention, Qatar contributed at least 400 million dollars to the Libyan war effort and, equally importantly, provided military training and assistance. What was at first portrayed as the sort of essentially peaceful protest against the government that the Tunisians and Egyptians had mounted was, in fact, a secession—or perhaps multiple defections—from a failed state. Not only was there little or no public bureaucracy, armed force had been distributed across a deliberately confusing and uncoordinated array of police, army, revolutionary guards and other special services; Qatar money and technical assistance proved decisive in ensuring what modicum of coordination exhibited by the military operations of the Transitional National Council.

The motives of the Qatari regime in supporting regime change are not altogether clear, although in the short run, the satisfaction of seeing two of their regional opponents—Mubarak and Gaddafi—unseated may be enough to explain their policies.

11. There is a “neighborhood effect” but it is not the same thing as the demonstration effect. Neighbors do matter, but not because they are models, or even friendly.

Syria’s regime continued to survive less because there was great enthusiasm for it regionally or internationally but because most of its neighbors, and most of their international and regional supporters, feared that were the regime to fall, the country risked descending into civil strife already sadly familiar to Lebanon and Iraq, and they were not prepared to risk the spillover effects that discord might have in their own territories. Hence they elected, sometimes gleefully, sometimes regretfully, to bear witness to the slow crippling of the Asad regime, but stopped short of either definitely shorting it up or decisively pushing it over.

What does this all mean for the Arab Uprisings of 2011? There is ample reason for optimism in Egypt and Tunisia. Strong states, populations with robust identities as citizens, and experienced political actors bode well for a successful—if difficult—regime change and the building of sustainable institutions of more open, transparent and accountable government. The amplified importance of individual skill in circumstances of transitions heightens the contingent quality of some of the specific outcomes but these are transitions that have every reason to work, and they will be managed domestically.

For the countries facing state collapse, particularly Libya, reconstruction will be very difficult, since non-state identities were strengthened and civic relationships further eroded during the military conflict. The rebuilding of the state apparatus, and the construction of a regime that can take responsibility for its functioning, will very likely require international assistance—and its recipients are likely to mistrust and resent offers of such assistance, even as they require it.

For the regimes that have been constructing states—and this includes not only Syria, but also Algeria and Iraq, which both saw ample violence in the last twenty years—the international community is confronted with populations at risk from their own governments. These governments will be brutal in protecting their interests, and they will have substantial domestic allies in doing so, since many people in these countries believe they have been well-served by the newly-emerging states and certainly have reason to fear alternative rulers or regimes. As the United States demonstrated in Iraq, international intervention in these circumstances is both tempting and difficult.

The Arab world now is an increasingly varied and complex landscape, with areas where the prospects for more transparent and accountable government are very good, and regions in which the building of coherent, legitimate states will have to precede creation of stable democracy. Fortunately, across the region, the processes that will eventually produce better government have finally begun.