

The Long Revolt

The Arab world's wave of change was a century in the making. Why expect its effects to become clear in the space of months?

BY RAMI G. KHOURI

WE ARE WITNESSING TODAY THE CULMINATION of a century of Arab popular struggle for freedom and sovereignty. That struggle was interrupted by many decades of often illusory statehood under the reign of autocrats who were enthusiastically supported by foreign powers. Today's struggle is the single most significant movement of Arab citizens and citizenries since the modern Arab world was created in the early 20th century.

That world was born amid revolts against the region's Ottoman and European overlords. When the European colonial powers finally retreated, the Ottomans having been swept aside by their defeat in World War I, they left behind a collection of Arab countries they essentially had manufactured for their own convenience out of their particular dominions. Twenty-two nominally sovereign Arab states ultimately emerged, and they limped into the 21st century battered and tattered by a combination of forces: their own economic mismanagement and corruption; regional wars and occupations involving Israel, Iran, and recurring invasions by the United States and Britain; severe income disparities resulting from the misuse of oil and gas wealth; and a stunning record of sustained autocracy and authoritarianism unmatched by any other region of the world.

Now Arab countries finally are being born of their own volition rather than through the false-birth handicraft of audacious European officials. The momentous process that is under way today is so complex and was so long in the mak-

ing that it is not surprising that we have a hard time finding a name for it. "Arab Spring" is the tag used in the West. "Revolution" (*thawra*) is the preferred name among those protesting and sometimes battling in the streets in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In some countries people speak of their "intifada" (uprising), the name popularized by the two Palestinian intifadas against Israeli occupation. Others speak of a "citizen revolt," the "Arab Awakening," or the "Arab Renaissance."

Half a year after the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes that launched this revolt, two important patterns have emerged. First, there is a common set of basic material and political grievances that citizens in most Arab countries share. Second, each regime's response to the protests has been determined by the intersection of two factors: the nature and legitimacy of the regime itself and the intensity of popular grievances. This is why the region is marked by such a variety of revolts and regime responses. There have been two regime changes to date, while active warfare and low-intensity violence continue in a few countries. In others, the national leaders, perhaps feeling themselves on firmer ground, are attempting to mute demands for change with a combination of massive cash handouts to the hard-pressed populace and negotiations, or at least dialogue, with those demanding changes in how power is exercised and citizens are treated.

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Understanding what is happening now and how things might evolve requires, above all, grasping the nature of the grievances that have caused people to go into the streets, knowing they risk death. For decades, the average Arab citizen suffered multiple hardships and injustices. These included rampant corruption, poor wages, a lack of jobs, low-quality education, occupation by foreign powers, security service abuses, and curbs on personal freedoms. By the

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1990s, the Arab order could be defined as one of continuous wars and internal violence, increasingly militaristic and corrupt security states, and burgeoning disparities in citizen well-being as a small, wealthy minority became increasingly distanced from masses of lower-income and poor Arabs. Average people were willing to endure as long as they felt that the future held out the hope of a better life for themselves or their children. From the 1930s to the late '80s, the future did indeed promise a better life for most Arabs. But the upward curve of promise flattened and in some cases reversed during the two decades before the current revolt erupted in Tunisia last December.

In Tunisia, Gallup surveys showed that the percentage of those who were “thriving” (a composite measure of well-being developed by the polling firm) fell by 10 points between 2008 and 2010. In Egypt, it fell by 17 points over a slightly longer period of time. (Last year, only 14 percent of Tunisians and 12 percent of Egyptians were classified as “thriving,” compared with 43 percent of Saudis and somewhat higher percentages of those in other Persian Gulf states.) At the same time, both countries had growing economies, which created a wealthy elite even as the majority of citizens felt that their prospects were declining. Last year, Gallup found that more than a quarter of all young people in Arab states wanted to emigrate—and the proportion reached more than 40 percent in Tunisia, Yemen,

and other countries. Arabs' confidence in the legitimacy of national elections was low. Dozens of other indicators affirm this picture of mass citizen discontent across the region, with the general exception of the wealthy Persian Gulf oil-producing states.

The Arabs who now challenge their governments share a common desire to achieve both personal and political goals. They want all the normal rights of citizenship, including meaningful voting rights, access to a credible judicial system, and freedom of the press. They want the ability to exercise their human faculties to read and write as they wish, enjoy arts and culture without draconian censorship, discuss public issues, travel and invest as they see fit, wear the clothes and listen to the music they prefer, and participate in the world of ideas that helps shape their society as well as define their public policies.

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia last December, inspiring the Arab revolt, he was driven to his desperate gesture by a terrible combination of material want and homegrown political humiliation felt by Arabs across the region. The intensity of the resulting demonstrations for serious change and the speed with which they spread throughout the Arab world suggest that these national rebellions, and the common regional trend they represent, will not wither away or be permanently suppressed by police actions.

This revolt is very different from the upsurge of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and '60s, when young Arab states still being born were caught up in a mass emotional and political response to a stultifying combination of what many saw as Israeli and Western aggression. That period of Arab nationalism was perhaps the last gasp of the anticolonial struggle that charismatic leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser tapped into so effectively. The mere idea of Arabs with shared identities, rights, and interests fighting for their sovereignty and building new countries electrified masses across the region for a fleeting decade, until the debacle of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war revealed the structural weaknesses of Arab nationalist regimes.

The current revolt is anchored much more solidly in the fierce determination of millions of citizens to live decent

and normal lives, free of material desperation and political indignity. The revolt's intensity and broad scope also reflect the fact that it did not emerge from a vacuum. It is, rather, the culmination of decades of activism by scores of groups small and large that have struggled unsuccessfully for civil and political rights. Those battles erupted in many countries but did not achieve regional momentum, and consequently received little attention abroad. The challenges to the Arab order came from a variety of civil society initiatives, democracy and human rights movements,

Soviet Union's collapse and a serious economic crisis that brought widespread hardship and forced bankrupt authoritarian states to open up their systems enough to allow citizens to air their frustrations and grievances. Roughly between 1986 and 1992, Arabs in the tens of millions embraced the possibilities of a more open press and the ability to create political parties and civil society organizations. Flocking to vote and speak their minds, they forcefully expressed their long-pent-up demand for real citizenship.



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The last of the line? Egypt's Hosni Mubarak was the third in a series of long-reigning "pharaohs" who have led the nation in modern times.

more specialized campaigns to promote the rights of women and workers, and thousands of individual writers and academics. Professional associations of lawyers, engineers, and doctors in many Arab countries have long fought for greater rights anchored in the rule of law, and business associations in recent years have also pushed for change, especially in education and the judiciary.

The Arab region enjoyed a brief spell of liberalization beginning in the late 1980s as a result of fallout from the

Islamist movements emerged in the 1980s as the most important challengers of Arab state power, and in most cases they were beaten down by the state's security forces, their members jailed en masse or forced into exile. The important thing about these movements—including the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, Egypt, and Syria; Al-Nahda in Tunisia; Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon; and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria—is that in almost every case they grew primarily on the strength of their status as local

groups demanding more citizen rights and empowerment, better government, and less corruption, rather than their criticisms of the United States and Israel. Today's revolt is built on the same foundation, with demands centered on citizen rights and constitutional changes, while foreign-policy issues take, at least for now, a back seat.

One American scholar who has long studied Arab political economy, former American University of Beirut president and Princeton University professor John Waterbury, noted in a private communication some months ago, "Quiescence has never been a consistent feature of the Arab world. Citing only from memory, I note the following: cost of living riots in Casablanca, 1965; food riots in Egypt, 1977; the Hama massacres of 1982 in Syria; cost of living riots in Jordan, Sudan, Algeria in the late 1980s; the Shia uprising in Iraq in 1991; the long-smoldering Islamist insurrection in Algeria after 1991; Houthis and others fighting the regime in Yemen; civil war continuously in the Sudan since the early '80s; the Lebanese civil war, 1976–89; the Palestinians against the Israelis seemingly forever, and so on.

"We should not confuse police states with political docility. There have been at least three other civilian-led protest movements that led to real change, but not to lasting change. In 1964 and again in 1985 civilian demonstrations led to the downfalls of General [Ibrahim] Abboud and Jaafar Numeiry of the Sudan, leading to years of civilian government, until 1989 when General Omar Bashir seized power and remains in power. In the spring of 2005 a million mostly young Lebanese went to Martyrs' Square in Beirut and brought about the downfall of the Karami government and the withdrawal of Syrian military forces from Lebanon."

Egypt alone in recent years has witnessed the rise of the Kefaya movement, which challenged Mubarak family rule in the years before the election of 2005; the judges' movement for the rule of law; human rights and voters' rights movements that included brave pioneers such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim and the Ibn Khaldoun Center; the April 6 Movement, which emerged from the 2008 labor strikes; the vibrant opposition press led by the start-up newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and others; and thousands of young bloggers who spoke on the Web when they were not allowed to speak in public. Such determined activism for freedom, democracy, and the rule of law has occurred in almost every Arab country over the past two generations.

Some Arab countries are now moving toward radical

change, while in others, citizens' democratic aspirations are frozen by the heavy hand of a ruling security state. New actors are emerging or reasserting themselves, including youth groups, formerly exiled or banned political parties, labor unions, private-sector-led political parties, and reform-oriented civil society organizations. Other actors, notably the military, Islamists, and traditional political parties, are repositioning themselves. The Arab political stage has now been repopulated with a rich array of new and reinvigorated actors. It will be some time before they sort themselves out, determining which will lead and which will play niche roles. Most Arab countries have not engaged in public politics for half a century; they should not be expected to transform themselves instantly.

Even as they are experiencing these momentous changes, Arab countries must deal with four enormous and simultaneous challenges: maintaining security, rekindling economic growth, creating legitimate and participatory governance systems, and preventing mass discontent sparked by unfulfilled expectations from pushing countries back toward autocratic rule. The liberated Arab lands that are able to slowly establish more democratic political governance systems will each take on a different tone and color as they create their own formulas from the possibilities before them: tribal values, pan-Arab sentiment, narrow nationalism, corporate globalism, Islamist influences, and roles for the military. Arab democracies will look very different from Western ones, and the world should have the patience and composure to let the people of this region find their own sustainable balances between religiosity and secularism, state-centered and pan-Arab nationalism, and traditional and modern forms of governance.

The key to success will be the ability of reconfigured democratic Arab systems to institutionalize citizen rights and limits to state power in enforceable constitutional systems, with the rule of law protected by an independent judiciary. These are the common elements of the rallying cry across the region. In every single country where Arab citizens have revolted against their regime, the main demand is for constitutional changes that protect the rights of individuals.

Arab democratization will need time to succeed. It will take at least a decade to show if the change now under way is irreversible—as I believe it is. ■