Five Years on the Arduous Road

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After the Uprisings: The Arab World in Freefall,
Fragmentation or Reconfiguration?

In 2002, a book authored by Ghassan Tueni, Jean Lacouture and Gerard Khoury chose a provocative title. *Un siècle pour rien* (a century for nothing) expressed the disenchantment of many as they contrasted the promises of the Arab Renaissance movement (*al Nahda*) of the early twentieth century with the undeniable failures at its end. Difficulties, uncertainties and erosion of energy affected minds and hearts of people, intellectuals included, for a long period of time. For this reason, the unanticipated acceleration of history in the early phases of the Arab revolution, five years ago with the re-emergence of faith in change was marked by a sense of surprise at the depth and scope of radical transformations. People were confident that what was unlikely for decades has become possible and they
are now able to assert their dignity, enjoy freedom and take part in shaping their future.

Five years ago, radical change seemed within reach. The revolutions came at a time when many doubted the ability to initiate genuine transformations in the Arab world. A minority only had considered them inevitable, once objective circumstances mature. Unexpected revolutions brought a promise of a brighter democratic future.

Although many Arabs agreed on the long-term causes of revolutions, they disagreed on understanding their immediate triggers, defining the new leading forces, redefining the place pre-existing political movements and assessing the novelty of an emerging revolutionary scene.

It is true that the majority of Arabs, whether citizens, politicians, intellectuals or researchers, did not foresee the uprisings, despite the authoritarian regimes’ continuous oppression and the deteriorating political and economic situation. A few movements and initiatives had come into view to challenge the prevailing order. These movements were limited in time, influence, and space (Kifaya’s protest movement against Mubarak’s rule and hereditary transfer of power). But
they have probably pushed the limits by daring to think about contesting the status quo ante.

A variety of expressions were used to describe the wave of movements for change in the Arab world. Many Westerners, and a large number of Arabs, welcoming—or even celebrating—the end of what they called “the Arab exception” to the wave of democratization referred to an “Arab spring”.

The metaphor, evoking a seasonal phenomenon, had been used before. The Damascus spring did not live long. The few months following the election of Bashar al Asad in 2000 seemed to augur greater freedom and a movement towards reforming the political system. It took another few months for hopes to be dispelled and illusions to be shattered. But in a country where there was hardly any political life outside blind loyalty to the regime or prison, the seeds of public opposition were planted.

The Prague spring had been a little longer it extended from January to August 1968 when the political liberalization in former Czechoslovakia initiated by Alexander Dubcek was tragically halted by the Soviet invasion. But although ephemeral, the Prague spring inspired music and literature and its spirit as well as
memory animated many actors for change in the late nineteen eighties. It goes without saying, that in both cases a short-lived spring had long-lasting effects.

For certain learned observers, another European spring comes to mind and is worth the comparison. In 1848, formidable obstacles which had been previously assaulted in vain seemed to be lifted. The tide of enthusiasm enfolded and carried away everybody, the abhorred despots first and foremost. This is how Benedetto Croce described the almost simultaneous revolts in many countries. But the revolutionary movements of 1848 collapsed as quickly as they had arisen. There was a combination of the greatest promise, the widest scope and the most immediate initial success with an unqualified failure.

Today, some of those who were impressed and fascinated by the unforeseen “Arab spring” seem shaken or worried. They resort to the metaphor of another season. Autumn, sometimes coupled with Islamism and often with violence or chaos, images disappointment or apprehension.

Naming in metaphors is, more often than not, interpretation rather than designation. For it has not been easy to agree on one. To be sure, disagreements are normal and so are hesitations. But the question of naming is not unrelated to the fact that intellectuals, academics and journalists could not predict those large
scale and profound movements for change in the Arab world. There were signs and precursor dynamics that were not recognized or, rather, no one believed that their cumulative effect would lead so unexpectedly to radical transformations.

Undoubtedly, the surprise effect invigorated many but their enthusiasm invites today a measure of humility. Among those who received with joy the blossoming spring, excitement may have prevailed over lucidity. For some, the subsequent and perhaps hurried disappointment has obscured their ability to discern the true meaning of many changes. Moreover, recourse to old certainties is not useful in situations of social upheaval. Others seem to hesitate between ideological denial and embarrassed silence. More obstinate are those who maintain that the key to understand every political development in the Arab world remains the primacy of the never-changing and never-ending duality of foreign domination and resistance. The undeniably endogenous factors at play in various protest movements or revolutions are discarded. At best, they are underestimated.

The use of the spring metaphor raises another question. Is there an Arab people’s revolt with national manifestations or do we witness a plurality of distinct revolutionary movements which resemble each other in certain means and
motivations, and have been a source of inspiration and mutual empowerment to each other? In other words, could there be a paradox of similarity and diversity?

To be sure, each of these movements was preoccupied with internal problems concerns and absorbed in confrontation with dictator regimes. In their struggle, the Arab nationalist objectives and language are hardly noticeable. Yet, the fact that neighboring non-Arab countries are not directly and visibly affected suggests that the shared cultural identity and sensitivity is not irrelevant.

However, simultaneity and common features could not overshadow the constitutive differences between Arab national societies and their specific histories. Suffice it to look in the mirror of various tribal and communal divisions, real and provoked, to discern such a diversity.

The dialectics of singularity and commonality is evident when we attempt to classify the regimes toppled or severely hit by movements for change. They may be grouped under the designation of “neo-patrimonial and authoritarian regimes” or that of “neo-sultanistic regimes”. Under such regimes, the private and the public are not separated nor is the factional political power different from the state authority. The private and public merge in one person, venerated more than the state and the nation themselves.
It is worth noting, however, that the category of “neo-patrimonial authoritarian regimes” excludes other forms of despotic rule and cannot be used across the Arab board. It is true that the winds of revolutionary change did not spare Bahrain and equally true that the demand for change may well be looming in seemingly quiet kingdoms. Nevertheless, it looks that the relative legitimacy of hereditary monarchies has made them less unacceptable to their people than the somewhat secular autocracies, and more particularly the hereditary ones which lack any acceptable source of legitimacy. The republics, the dynastic ones in particular, arose from coup d’états with great nationalist and social promises and ended in corruption and repression. For their part, monarchies never espoused any utopia. The disenchantment seems less intense.

But the diversity of national situations could not overshadow the endemic disillusionment with despotic rulers. The question that invites a differentiated answer is whether it is a cause or an expression of a profound malaise, whether political demands, in their own right, drive people and mobilize them. One could argue that the economic and social root-causes create political energy, more in certain countries than in others, and no matter how strong is the force of resentment, it does not explain, by itself, the popular spread of revolutionary movements.
In other words, similarity and diversity across the Arab world, are to be held in balance or, perhaps, in tension. Commonality may well be revealed in the non-violent, non-ideological and generational features of most early Arab revolts, at least in their defining phase. Equally comparable is fact of asserting the centrality of democracy, liberties and personal dignity. Singularity, for its part, is inevitable when it comes to future prospects. It is well illustrated by the comparison between Tunisia and Egypt, quite frequently made, between their armies, their political elites and their Islamist movements.

For some, prospective vision is often blurred by perception of Islamism, seen as undifferentiated, in certain cases more influential than they truly are and in all cases irresistible. Worse, there are those who risk the dangerous pitfall of considering Islamism to be the most authentic expression, even if excessive, of Islam itself. Any resurgence of Islam, they say, is retrogression. One dares not assume that the concerns and fears of many could be exorcised only by a nuanced analysis of Islamism. This is even more difficult, because despotic regimes those overthrown or are still in place, such as the Syrian, overplay worries and instrumentalize them. They claim to protect their people against fears which they have themselves provoked.
Today, wherever democratic elections were held, large numbers of citizens voted for political parties that advocate Shari ‘a as a source of legitimacy and law. While these actors claim to recapture what in the past has made the Islamic state great, they announce their commitment to democracy suggesting that the new Islamic state is not a modern replica of the old.

In addition, the Islamist opposition to secular tyranny is seen, in a commonly used metaphor, as a wave suggesting that however big waves seem to be, they are appeased once they have used up their initial driving force. It may still be premature to suggest that Islamist movements will have to reinvent themselves or lose much of their appeal. Islamic activists played a significant role but not a leading one in the uprisings.

The strength of Islamist movements is derived from the fact that they are regional, relatively better organized and have acquired the legitimacy and experience of having been a long-standing opposition force. But many will likely undergo a process of transformation and repositioning. Of a middle class origin, educated and not immune to the effects of secularization, some Islamists are intellectually equipped and ready for compromise. Be that as it may, most Islamist movements considered that their political existence and developments is
dependent on their electoral legitimacy. This was not negligible even if democracy, beyond holding and winning elections, remains untested.

Democratic legitimacy it is to be seen in relation to the opportunity and ability to participate in effective deliberation. A public debate about divisive values is much more than cautious controversies and polemics leading to repression, as in the case of the recent electoral campaign in Egypt. There are political theorists who emphasize what is called “deliberative democracy” is rooted in the intuitive ideal of a democratic association where terms and conditions of living harmoniously together proceed through public argument and reasoning among equal citizens.

In other words, democratic legitimacy is not derived solely from elections. After the fall of some neo-patrimonial authoritarian regimes, and in the popular revolt against others, it is largely admitted that the future political existence and developments of the forces that joined the struggle against dictators is dependent on their electoral legitimacy. This is not negligible even if democracy, beyond holding and winning elections, is not necessarily in high demand. For democracy cannot be reduced to one of its expressions, and no matter how crucial it is. Free and fair elections, whenever held, secured the right to elect. Less unequivocal was the right of all to be elected. This is all the more important from the perspective
of pluralism. In pluralist societies, inclusive participation in the democratic processes, elections included, is essential. There are institutional mechanisms, and quotas are an obvious one, that facilitate the emergence of wider representation, reflecting plurality in a given society.

In other situations, fears of the tyranny of an overwhelming majority needed to be dissipated. Multiplicity of centers of power, independence of the judiciary and the safeguarding of human rights and civil liberties are essential in any democracy. They are more critical in the case of a plural society. Human rights are certainly those of the individual but they are also the rights of an individual to be part of community that has rights. As for civil liberties, they are not only guaranteed by constitutions and protected through law enforcement. The force of their respect is also drawn from adherence to core values widely shared.

To be sure, majority rule is legitimate but its misuse to suppress minorities is not. The function of democratic institutions in plural societies is not only to ensure adequate representation in legislature and government. They have a role of arbitrating tensions and conflicts as well as maintaining a sort of equilibrium between competing aspirations such as those of affirming diversity by some and insisting on unity by others, promoting individual political rights, one man one
vote, by advocates of genuine citizenship and defending community rights by those who pursue identity politics. This is all the more critical in fragmented societies, ruled by a weak and weakened state, such as Libya. Elections as competition for power, if preceding a national consensus on the priorities of state building, tended to exacerbate divisions.

Democratic transition, as it was and still called by political theorists, has been far more arduous than unanticipated, the Tunisian exception notwithstanding. In some cases, the assumption or irreversibility could not resist careful scrutiny. The social demand for security and stability, in a context of chaos and violence is interpreted, in the case of Egypt for example, to be a demand for authoritarian rule.

The causes of instability are numerous, largely internal but also external. The manifest ones are attributable to the precariousness of national cohesion and the rising influence, hitherto suppressed, of centrifugal forces, in the absence of a functioning state, such as in Libya and Yemen. In these countries, and others, the legacy of authoritarian regimes weighs heavily on political conduct and transitional justice. It continues to nurture suspicions and mutual fears. More importantly, it hinders efforts at rebuilding state institutions left in desolation.
To be sure, the shortfalls of transition could not be overstated. The deficit in competence and experience of large segments of the new political elites, the weakness of political forces with a social base attached to democratic values or aspiring to a democratic order may well explain the volatility of state institution building.

Progress on the arduous road towards democratic transformation could not be achieved by adopting a presumably universal model of democratic transition, advocated by “transitologists”, though less confident than they were when they produced a cluster of theories following the so-called third wave of democratization. Favored hypothesis on how Arab countries are likely to evolve are indeed questionable and questioned. A paradigm of political change has to be better suited to the landscape of today, not the lingering hope of an earlier era.

Five years have shown that many assumptions made found little or no evidence to support them. Elections, repetitive in Egypt and Libya, did not necessarily lead to the consolidation of democracy, long-standing, even if latent, did not dissipate easily, institutions were not capable of playing a mediating and pacifying role in politics and economy, change did not inevitably start at the national level but local good governance was more difficult to pursue, more liberal economic
policies did not yield economic growth, national priorities were not often compatible, one had to be sacrificed for the other and trade-offs were rarely successful.

Pre-conceived ideas, derived from the recent histories of nations in Eastern Europe or Latin America, were close to being a recipe for disillusionment or even failure. In Libya, where the international community, including the UN major western nations and international NGO’s, played a determining role, such failure is patent. Precipitation in moving forward did not adequately recognize the strength of asserting sub-national identities and interests, nor those of cultural resistance to new norms of political practice. Not enough time was given to the first, but crucial, phase of transition, which establishes rules for public life accepted by all, ensuring the widest possible political participation and developing consensus on the priorities of national cohesion and state building. A contrario, the struggle for power preceded the negotiation of a new social contract and was oblivious to the essential distinction between controlling a government and appropriating a state.

In referring to the widest possible political participation, I meant to affirm the principle of inclusivity as a condition for the success of the early phase in the
democratic transition, before opt for electoral competition. Inclusivity as an energizing principle proved to be too costly for those who had the assurance and thought having the capacity to represent the people, having lead the revolution on its behalf. Unprepared or unwilling to pay the cost, they refrained from reaching out to the fearful minorities- whether ethnic, religious or political. The inability to include contributed to the radicalization of some of those excluded, whether islamist or not.

For their part, some the islamists who rejected western democratic norms in the name of authenticity and specificity or those who believed that imported models are bound to fail, saw their positions converge with the perspectives offered by the culturalists in suggesting that democracy is not compatible with Arab deeply grounded realities and could not be emulated as a system of governance.

A few weeks ago, our Policy Institute at the American University of Beirut, in cooperation with the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, organized a conference on the Arab revolutions, five years on. More than sixty papers where presented. Understandably, they did not venture in predicting the future. Largely their analysis of the transformation processes was largely inductive, sociological and historical, reading a path between the pitfalls of those who stubbornly
interpret recent developments in the light of democratization theories and those who question the very meaning and relevance of democracy for Arab societies.

It is my sincere hope that this conference will follow a similar path, patiently and with no pretension. I also look forward to engaging in the difficult task of prospective reflection.

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