The Arduous Road

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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” referred to an “Arab spring”.

The metaphor invokes a season. The Damascus spring did not live long. The few months following the election of Bashar al Assad 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.

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 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 success with an unqualified failure.

Today, some of those who were impressed and fascinated by the unanticipated “Arab spring” seem shaken or worried. They resort to the metaphor of another season. Autumn, often coupled with Islamism, 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 Intellectuals and academics 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.

Among those who received with joy the blossoming spring, excitement may have prevailed over lucidity. For some of them, 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 internal 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 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, do not we have a paradox of similarity and diversity?

To be sure, each of these movements was, and is, preoccupied with internal concerns and absorbed in their confrontation with the dictator regimes they oppose. 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 Arab cultural identity and sensitivity is not irrelevant. The Arab revolts broke two years after the suppression of the “green revolution” in Iran. Such a failure had no deterrent effect in spite of Iran’s influence in many countries.
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 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.
Today, disappointment is as spread as yesterday’s enthusiasm. Fear, often real and sometimes engineered, over shadow lucidity. Uncertainty, justified as it may be, blurs our prospective thinking. Sometimes, we understate the simple fact that transformations initiated by revolutions, are processes and such processes are not irreversible. Egypt, where we have a counter-revolution is a case in point.

Many academics, western or Arab, who failed to predict revolutions, continue to debate theories about democratization and democratic transitions. Much of the transitology has proven to a recipe for confusion. As a UN Special Representative for Libya, I often reminded the Security Council that preconceived ideas about transition have to be revisited. And for certain countries, early elections have proved to be counter-productive. New political forces had little time to organize themselves. Other political forces were organized only to win elections. They reduced democracy to the verdict of the ballot box, where winner takes all. In fragmented countries, marked by the resurgence of ethnic, regional and tribal, self-assertion, early elections were divisive. In situations where building of state institutions and nation building are a priority, a national consensus was needed prior to political competition.

Transition practices remained largely based on a number of assumptions with little evidence to support them: elections do not necessarily lead to the fulfilling of democratic ideals. Longstanding group divisions – and the residues of historic rivalries – do not dissipate quickly. The adoption of a liberal economic policy regime does not necessarily produce better economic outcomes. In many Arab countries, states demonstrated fragility after the fall of dictatorship; public institutions are corrupt and poor in implementing policies. More importantly, their autonomy vis-à-vis political power is limited. In Libya, I used to emphasize the distinction between state and power الدولة و السلطة but was never heard. So many structures are built around patronage networks. With fragile state institutions, political settlements have been unstable, Political actors tend to act exclusively, because they see no other way to secure their interests. This reality has pushed back further the formation of an apolitical state bodies capable of delivering services and fairly apply the law.
Our fragile states could not consolidate or create national solidarity. Egypt lost much of its “national unity” and Libya could not develop a strong national identity. Compelling actors encouraged their social base to revert to subnational identities.

Forms of secessionism and exacerbation of subnational identities with potentially tragic consequences have come to the fore. Well-organized groups, especially extremist and armed factions, have had strong advantage in such context, even if they are relatively few in numbers. (Da’ich).

The forces that came to power were expected to rely on an initial agreement that binds the major actors together. It was broken by clashing visions and priorities. Coming together to overthrow a despot, actors have often deadlocked on how to move forward. In the case of Egypt, a specific understanding of religion in public life seemed to permit a limited area for compromise and accommodation.

Civil society organization, with the exception of Tunisia, are weak or lack independence in relation to political forces. English-speaking and western funded small organizations, and philanthropic networks established by Islamist parties, have had a limited impact on the transformative process. The media’s deficit in independence and professionalism have weakened both its credibility and influence. For sure, it did not help steering the transition towards the rule of law and democracy. Last but not least, donors and multilateral agencies have been significant source of assistance. Yet the large number of actors, with their particular interests and conditionality, became overwhelming. After an initial good reception, misperceptions and misunderstanding led to an erosion of credibility and trust. Egypt was an extreme case.

In Tunisia, a national covenant was in the making years before the Bouazizi revolutionary trigger. This was made possible through public debate and political dialogue. Major opposition political parties reached a consensus on the guidelines for the country governance. In the “Call from Tunis”, they agreed on such things as the role of elections, the place of religion and Muslim-Arab values in society, and the rights of women. Starting in 2005, parties met to reaffirm their commitment to these principles while working to reach a common understanding
of priorities for Tunisia’s future. These agreements and the relationships built in the process allowed Islamic and secular leaders to peacefully overcome their mutual fears and distrust during the first several years of the democratization process.

Part of Tunisia’s success can be attributed to the relatively favorable starting political conditions and the relationships that were built. Most importantly, no political party had a deep conviction about its ability to rule on its own. The Islamist Ennahda party, the largest, could not obtain a majority and thus had to form a coalition with two other parties. Rashid Gannoushi recognized the depth of division in the Tunisian society and chose to avoid its exacerbation. Learning from the lessons of Egypt, he believed that a compromise was desirable and needed. He had to convince his supporters that winner could not take all. So did Nida’a Tunis after winning parliamentary and presidential elections. These actions highlighted the fact that inclusiveness is not just a highly valued principle, it is, first and foremost, a wise approach to post-revolution politics.

The relative success in Tunisia, compared with Egypt, Libya or Yemen could be explained by the existence of a broad-based middle class, high literacy rate and large-scale urbanization. More importantly there are three factors that should be emphasized. Tunisia has a small military, very professional and not susceptible to authoritarian temptation. It has developed an institutional culture that accepts civilian control of armed forces. Civil society played a central role in nudging the country along in a democratic transition. First it kept watch on the regime’s performance and later it facilitated dialogue and compromise. Across the political divides when normal politics in formal institutions hit an impasse. Political elites, both secular and Islamist, were committed to the establishment of democratic institutions in the country. They were able to agree on a progressive constitution that was an honorable compromise on the thorny issues such as role of religion, and gender equality.

Arab countries have chartered very different courses since 2011. What seems to be an inhospitable context can lead to democracy if given appropriate leadership, state institutions and a vibrant civil society. Despite the difficulties they present to
fragile states, transitions offer a chance to foster a new national dynamics of 
transformation. It needs a consensus on, and commitment to, guiding principles 
for dealing with urgent issues and the priorities of state reconstruction. 
Inclusiveness is one of the most fundamental principles. No one among those who 
took part in the revolutions nor the majority of those who served the state under 
the previous regime or passively supported it, without blood on their hands, 
should be excluded.

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