

Toby Dodge

After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: from the 'Arab Awakening' to the Arab Spring; the post-colonial state in the Middle East

Report

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➤ From the 'Arab Awakening' to the Arab Spring; the Post-colonial State in the Middle East

Toby Dodge

The consequences of the political turmoil that swept across the Middle East in 2011 support the claim that those twelve months have been the most politically significant in the region for over fifty years. The tragic self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid on December 17, 2010 was not just the final desperate act of an individual ground down by state corruption, repression and incompetence. His suicide gave rise to a region-wide wave of sympathy, an empathy that was quickly politicised by the mass recognition of his desperation: the long-term failure of Arab states to deliver on promises of citizenship, political freedom and economic development. Mohamed Bouazizi's death triggered a powerful movement of political mobilisation challenging the governing elites of the Middle East. Within a month this movement had forced the Tunisian President, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, to seek refuge in Saudi Arabia after twenty-four years of rule. Ten days after his departure, mass demonstrations spread to Egypt and dominated the centre of Cairo. Faced with a popular movement of Cairo's youth, the army were reluctant to face public opprobrium and chose not to fire on the crowd. By February 11, Hosni Mubarak, who had ruled Egypt for thirty years, was forced from office. The strength of popular protest was such that two dictators had been driven from office, and the remaining ruling elites in Tunisia and Egypt were compelled to hold free and fair parliamentary elections in an attempt to meet the democratic demands of its population.

The arrival of democratic government in the Middle East has long been predicted, but, until 2011, perennially delayed. Much to the surprise of historians and social scientists, and to the anger of a great deal of their own population, the externally imposed, weak and illegitimate post-colonial states of the region had proved to be remarkably stable and militantly autonomous in the face of sustained domestic, regional and international challenges.

With the exception of Iran in 1979, after the initial phase of post-colonial consolidation it was the mid-1980s that saw the first major 'crisis' of the Middle Eastern state. This was caused by the collapse of the international oil price in 1985 and the failure of import substitution-led industrial growth. By the mid-1980s, an economically liberal if not politically democratic breakthrough appeared imminent as the capacity of states to deliver on promises of economic and social development came to an end.

The sense of democratic possibility again came to the fore after the Gulf War of 1990–1. The fall of the Berlin Wall, the liberation of Kuwait by US-led forces and the increasing influence of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were all thought to be potential catalysts for change. Sadly, the hopes of the early 1990s were not realised.

Finally, in the aftermath of Al-Qaeda's attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, a degree of hope spread amongst the liberal intelligentsia of the Middle East. Discussions amongst democratic activists across the region and their colleagues in exile in Europe and America were bolstered by an optimism that the atrocities committed in New York and Washington would act as a catalyst for long awaited political change. This liberal optimism predicted that the outmoded and anachronistic rulers, embarrassing relics from the post-colonial Cold War era, would finally succumb to the inexorable forces of globalisation. The hoped-for result would see the rise of democratic government, eagerly anticipated long awaited in the salons, *diwaniyya* and lecture theatres of the region.

To a certain extent the pundits of the liberal *diwaniyya* were not initially disappointed. The administration of George W. Bush agreed with their analysis of Middle East state autonomy and the need for a muscular external stimulus to trigger change across the region. However, the results of the 2003 invasion of Iraq were unexpected. Regime change in Baghdad did send shock waves across the region. But, if anything, the chaos and violence that exploded in Iraq in its aftermath allowed the rulers in the region to tighten their grip, as they could portray themselves as guardians of order and stability.

Against this background, it is the indigenous popular movements triggered by the death of Mohamed Bouazizi, rather than external catalysts, that have had the transformatory effects long awaited across the Middle East. Their destabilising dynamics are still unfolding in both Libya and Syria. However, these movements raise the larger analytical question of why did it take so long? Why, until 2011, have the regimes of the Middle East been able to defend their autonomy in the face of economic failure, international change and domestic discontent?

THE RISE OF POST-COLONIAL ARAB STATE

Part of the reason for the longevity of ruling regimes across the region rests on the fact that post-colonial states of the Middle East entered the international system at a specific economic and ideological moment. They bear the heritage of this admission both in the economic policies the regimes deployed until the 1980s and in the regime type and leadership method. The seizure of the Egyptian state by Gamal Abdel Nasser and fellow free officers in 1952 signalled not only the abolition of the Egyptian monarchy but also the rise of radical republicanism at the heart of the Middle Eastern state system. It is the final removal of the descendants of this influential regime that makes the Arab Spring so historically important.

The republican states of the Mashreq and Maghreb, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and Syria, strove to distance themselves from their former colonial masters between the 1950s and 1970s. The independence they strove to establish was influenced by the then dominant international economic and political trends that gave legitimacy, financial support and technical assistance to state-driven modernisation across the third world. Both Eastern bloc and Western aid donors favoured state-led development models, with academics in the developing world also encouraged the state's dominance of the economy, as a way of increasing the national autonomy of late-industrialising countries in the international economy.

As the Arab post-colonial republican regimes strove to consolidate their power, they faced indigenous economic classes that lacked the financial power or social coherence to pose an effective challenge to the state's dominance of its population. The military bureaucrats that now staffed the main institutions of the state were comparatively unrestrained by domestic interest groups as they attempted to transform society by unleashing what Ellen Trimberger aptly described as a 'revolution from above'. Their aim was to 'modernise' both economy and society without mobilising a mass political movement that could threaten their newly obtained political power. This strategy of sustained demobilisation was broadly successful until 2011.

The 'revolutions from above' pursued by republican regimes in Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Iraq and Syria were pragmatic, and implemented in a step-by-step manner. However, the economic goals of state-driven development served political ends. By intervening directly in the economy, by instigating widespread land reform in the name of national development, the republican regimes directly attacked the foundations of the ancien regime and replaced those formerly empowered by colonial state building. The policies of state-driven development were intended to destroy large landowners whose prestige and economic wealth had constituted the unstable social base of the previous regimes. In addition, by taking the dominant role in the economy the republican regimes denied space for an indigenous Arab bourgeoisie to gain enough economic weight or political influence to challenge the state.

The legacy of this political and economic approach was ambiguous to say the least. After taking power, the Arab republican states quickly developed all the trappings of modern government, with large and complex bureaucracies, powerful armies, urbanisation and a degree of welfare provision. But, as Nazih Ayubi persuasively argued, although they acquired the ability to deploy violence frequently against their populations, they lacked the institutional capacity to extract resources regularly and efficiently in the form of taxation. In this sense they were certainly 'fierce' states, but not strong ones. They lacked the institutional power and political legitimacy to implement government policy effectively and regulate society throughout their territory. State intervention in society was often unwelcome; regarded by the population at best to be a necessary evil and at worst as an illegitimate intrusion.

Against this background, the Arab governments involved in post-colonial state formation proved unable or unwilling to institutionalise legal-rational bureaucratic links to their populations. This led to the creation of more informal and personal networks of social control and mobilisation. Individuals were forced to rely on personal contacts with people in positions of power in order to guarantee their economic survival when state institutions and market mechanisms alike failed to provide resources. As a result, neo-patrimonial structures of political organisation predominated.

Clientalism provided the link between the ruling elite and its immediate trusted circles and, by way of widening circles of patron–client relationships, a sizable minority of the population. This system did not link politicians with the 'public' in a democratic contract but tied patrons personally with their associates, clients and supporters.

Neo-patrimonialism as a method of political rule is inherently unstable. It is based on unequal access to government resources and it constantly creates and recreates constituencies of the dispossessed and resentful. It was these constituencies that eventually united in 2011 to unseat Ben Ali and Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt. However, clientalism does have advantages for Middle Eastern leaders who control the pinnacle of the neo-patrimonial networks. By the very nature of neo-patrimonialism, the relations between state and society that it nurtures are unofficial, diffuse and for the most part implicit. This means they are organic and flexible, changing to suit the needs of both patron and client in times of political turmoil or economic scarcity. Ultimately, access to state patronage has defined the shape of the public sphere across the Middle East. Economic opportunities, group loyalties and social and political identities have all been shaped and reshaped, based upon where a specific individual stands in relation to the state-sponsored patronage networks that prevailed in the region.

THE CRISIS OF THE ARAB STATE

The combination of state-driven development policies and dependence on neo-patrimonialism to secure the political loyalty of key constituencies ensured that the economies of Middle Eastern states were shaped in the image of the regimes that came to power between the 1950s and 1970s. Already modest private sector, perceived as economically unviable, were swept aside in the name of national development. The state gradually took more and more responsibility for the economy, moving from a planning and coordinating role to direct investment in and management of industrial production. This worked well as a strategy for increasing regime power, both by integrating potentially influential entrepreneurs directly into the state and making their success heavily dependent on state

favours. But it also had the effect of politicising the performance of the economy. Post-colonial Arab governments that promised rapid modernisation in return for loyalty were taken at their word. When economic success was meagre or non-existent the blame was directed at the policy and behaviour of the ruling elites.

During the 1980s and 1990s two related phenomena arose that placed distinct limits on the political autonomy that Arab states had enjoyed for thirty years. The first was the growing influence that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank came to have over the indebted non-oil-producing states of the region. By the mid-1980s the Bretton Woods institutions insisted that the economies of recipient states were 'structurally adjusted' as a condition for further borrowing. The economies of Algeria, Tunisia and Egypt all succumbed to the prescriptions of market reliance at the heart of the neoliberal 'Washington Consensus' promoted by the IMF and World Bank. In return for receiving large loans those states had to limit their involvement in the economy, removing import quotas, cutting tariffs and interest rate controls and moving towards the privatisation of state industries. Even states like Syria that fought hard to maintain control over their economic sovereignty had to conform to some extent to the new economic zeitgeist in the face of poorly performing economies and increasing indebtedness.

The second, and in many ways more shocking, threat to the autonomy of Middle Eastern states arose from the dynamics of operating in a unipolar world. A number of republican regimes – notably Syria and Iraq – depended on the Eastern bloc for weapons and technology, and more importantly, for diplomatic leverage in their relations with Israel, the United States and the United Nations. With the sudden demise of their Communist allies their international autonomy was radically curtailed. Diplomacy became a more delicate operation; it had to be carried out unilaterally and with a greater sense of vulnerability.

International threats to the political and economic sovereignty of the Middle East were compounded by the fall in the price of oil, which had a significant effect at the regional level. State-driven development

strategies pursued from the 1950s onward had been directly and indirectly sheltered from the dynamics of the global economy by increasing oil wealth and its associated inter-Arab aid and worker remittances. By the mid-1980s this oil-based autonomy was in serious doubt. OPEC had become a victim of its own success, as the high cost of oil forced Western consumer economies to improve fuel efficiency and made exploration for oil in non-OPEC areas more cost-efficient.

The repercussions of the oil price collapse of the mid-1980s can be gauged by noting the dependence of non-oil-producing states on inter-Arab aid and worker remittances sent home from the Gulf states. For Syria the assistance it received from the oil-producers was equal to 25 percent of the state budget. The Middle East's real gross national product in the 1980s fell by a yearly average of 2.4 percent. The end of bipolarity, the increased power of the IMF and the World Bank and the collapse of oil prices placed severe pressure on Arab regimes, which were forced to search for alternative sources of finance, further limiting their capacity for autonomous policymaking.

Domestically, there seemed to be little alternative to the neoliberal prescriptions for the socio-economic woes facing Middle Eastern states. The failure of the statist model was as apparent to Arab populations as to their leaderships. Trade imbalances and increasing foreign debt forced governments to cut back expenditure, further depressing employment and growth. State-imposed austerity highlighted the structural crisis of the economy, the ineffectual nature of previous government policy and the state's dependence on external funding.

The inability of regimes to maintain, let alone improve, living standards directly affected their legitimacy. The collapse of the Soviet Union and its statist ideology undermined comparable regional ideologies and liberal triumphalism at the end of the Cold War influenced domestic Arab political opinion. By the early 1990s, in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War, the predictions of proponents of globalisation seemed to be justified and the republican regimes of the Middle East appeared increasingly anachronistic. State-driven development had failed to deliver economic

modernisation to the vast majority of the population. Tens of thousands of graduates produced by ambitious education programmes were facing a very bleak future as urban unemployment increased. The states themselves were increasingly indebted and were imposing austerity measures to meet balance-of-payments crises. Food subsidies were cut and the Egyptian government faced bread riots. The triumph of liberal democracy (if not quite the 'end of history' predicted by Francis Fukuyama) appeared well-grounded, even inevitable, and not just the bombastic celebration of market capitalism.

TRANSFORMATION POSTPONED

The political and economic transformation of the Middle East predicted in the 1990s did not transpire for the rest of that decade and well into the new century. Although Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia all sustained structural adjustment, their leadership remained stubbornly in place. The structures of political power remained robust after the Cold War ended despite the increasing influence of the Washington Consensus. Even the retreat of the state from the economic sphere was halting and ambiguous. From the 1990s until 2011, the post-colonial autonomy of Arab leaders proved robust in the face of sustained political and economic challenges from the international system.

The survival strategies of the Arab ruling elites persisted during the 1980s and 1990s because the challenges they faced were not constant, homogeneous nor wholly indigenous. Regimes muddled through successfully by partially or temporarily addressing problems in one sphere while ignoring or using intimidation in another. Key players in the international system could be bought off with limited but well-timed diplomatic initiatives.

Egypt's extended flirtation with restricted economic and political liberalisation became both a template for others and a warning about the threat to regime autonomy if strict limits were not placed on the whole process. Egypt's *infitah* or economic opening, declared in April 1973, was the consequence of state economic failure but also of the availability of regional assistance and international support. Egypt's problems sprang

from the collapse of the statist economic model in the mid-1960s and an accompanying foreign exchange crisis that effectively brought import substitution-led industrial growth to an end. Nasser's successor, Anwar Sadat, saw the opportunity for redress by seeking financial investment from the Gulf states in the immediate aftermath of the 1973 oil price rises. Sadat realigned Egypt's foreign policy with Washington, judging the Americans would be able to broker a favourable deal with the IMF and the World Bank in return for the strategic alliance he offered.

Domestically, Sadat's move away from the state's dominance of the economy allowed him to forge a new alliance with the entrepreneurial section of the upper middle classes. The breaking of landowner and bourgeoisie political and economic power under Nasser enabled Sadat to integrate a weak, fractured and dependent business class into the lowest levels of the patronage system without threatening his power base. This limited economic liberalisation was accompanied by the theatre of elections and the installation of a parliament. However, the dangers of political and economic liberalisation became apparent when the new bourgeoisie developed autonomous links with the international economy and social unrest flared as a result of the unequal distribution of the new financial resources. The ensuing crackdown by the state set the template for Egypt's *infitah* – slow and sporadic economic liberalisation followed by authoritarian state action when the process appeared to be moving beyond state control.

Egypt's pioneering if ambiguous experimentation with liberalisation accentuated the strategy the majority of Arab ruling elites adopted to stay in power. They continued to rule from the 1990s through to 2011 because they put political survival above the welfare of their populations. The post-colonial states of the Middle East carefully constructed the economic setting within which economic liberalisation unfolded. The bourgeoisie, identified by theories of liberalisation as the shock troops of reform, were highly dependent upon the state. As a consequence, until the Arab Spring, political and economic changes were successfully managed by incumbent regimes for their own ends. Liberalisation was never allowed to threaten a regime's power base or its ability control the population.

The main ambition of the reform process was to manage economic imbalances without damaging political autonomy. To that end financial resources were sought from donors who would minimise conditionality. The most attractive source of finance was indigenous capital that had been removed from the domestic economy in order to escape the reach of the state, capital that often belonged to elements of the bourgeoisie and landed classes decimated in the early years of state-building. Ironically, the very regimes that set out to destroy the power of the ancien regime in the 1950s and 1960s were by the 1990s basing a major element of their survival strategy on them. Expatriate capital was welcomed to fill the space vacated by the state's reduction of its own economic role, with the hoped-for economic growth produced by this new wave of investment meant to lessen the social tensions created by government austerity. Yet whilst this crony capitalism brought the bourgeoisie back into the domestic economy, it heightened their dependence on the regime and its maintenance of the status quo and further exacerbated inequalities of wealth.

The privatisation process in Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Tunisia was thus dominated by a small set of businesspeople with close links to the highest echelons of the regime. The relationship became symbiotic, with those in positions of political power increasingly developing private economic interests. This process went a step further as the old Nasserist elites in Egypt were sidelined in the 1980s and replaced by economic technocrats. The change in personnel and in government rhetoric was indicative of a realignment in the social coalition the regime was based on. The urban working class and the peasantry, previously carefully mobilised to support the regime, were marginalised as the newly empowered bourgeoisie were integrated into the regime as subordinate partners, leaving both urban and rural populations alienated from the state and the ruling elites.

The ramification of this controlled economic reform was the birth of a 'liberal' authoritarianism in the Middle East during the 1990s. The state surrendered some of its economic roles, but only in order to consolidate its political position. The ruling coalition was broadened and the bourgeoisie were brought

back in, but having been given a large stake in the status quo they were not inclined to push for democratisation. Until 2011, elections were held and parliaments stocked with representatives who debated and passed laws, but the locus of power never moved from the presidential palaces as the day-to-day management of politics remained largely untouched by democratic trappings contrived to please the international community. The system created glaring inequalities of wealth, increasingly obvious government corruption and uneven economic growth. For the best part of the three decades preceding the Arab Spring a cynical, demobilised population struggling to get by in a poorly performing economy was constrained by a brutally coercive state.

THE CAUSES OF THE ARAB SPRING

William Quandt has astutely argued that authoritarian regimes base their survival on four ingredients: 'ideology, repression, payoffs, and elite solidarity'. In Tunisia and Egypt the ideological justifications for rule had long since failed to have any purchase on the population. The acceptance of neoliberal rhetoric by the governing elite stripped them of their socialist and developmental justification for authoritarian rule. In its place they increasingly resorted to a conspiratorial nationalism, blaming economic failure on a shadowy and shifting coalition of external actors. Given Hosni Mubarak's close working relationship with the Israeli government and Egypt's financial dependence on American aid, the use of nationalist paranoia as a justification for rule was bound to have a limited appeal. This was especially the case amongst an increasingly youthful population who had no memory of the post-colonial glory of Nasser in Egypt or Bourguiba in Tunisia.

The increasingly brazen nature of regime corruption in both Egypt and Tunisia was enabled through the exclusion of the majority of the population from the economy. Family members of the ruling elite flaunted their wealth in the streets of Tunis and Cairo as standards of living for the majority of the population stagnated. The constituency for revolutionary change steadily expanded as the percentage of the population between 15 and 29 years-old rose, by 50 percent in

Tunisia and 60 percent in Egypt since 1990. Finally, as the membership of the coalition of the dispossessed increased, the ability of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes to provide pay-offs was also put under increasing pressure. In order to buy off its population the Egyptian government was reportedly spending \$3 billion a year subsidising the price of bread (Egypt is the world's largest importer of wheat with Tunisia coming in at number seventeen). Through 2007 and 2008 the world price of wheat steadily rose, causing a thirty-seven percent increase in the price of bread in Egypt.

Although the death of Mohamed Bouazizi acted as a catalyst for the sustained protest against the formerly robust dictatorships in Tunisia, Egypt and then Libya and Syria, the structural drivers had long been in place. Finally, in the face of extended street protests Quandt's fourth pillar of regime stability, elite solidarity cracked. In Tunisia, Ben Ali ordered Rachid Ammar, the head of the army to fire on protestors. With a strategic eye on the president's increasing unpopularity and his own place in any future post-regime change Tunisia Anwar refused, and sealed the fate of Ben Ali's rule. A similar dynamic was soon at work in Egypt, where Field Marshall Mohamed Hussein Tantawi refused to order the army to fire on demonstrators, thus guaranteeing his survival after the regime change that inevitably followed his refusal to sanction violence.

Unlike the arrival in the Middle East of the World Bank and the IMF in the 1980s or the demonstration effect of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the liberation of Kuwait in 1989 and 1991, the Arab Spring of 2011 was a wholly indigenous movement driven forward by the brave agency of young people in Cairo and Tunisia. The contrast between the hesitant, contradictory and reactive approach of the Obama administration and the dynamic behaviour of the Arab Street only served to highlight that it was Arabs once again making their own history, in spite and not because of the international dynamics that had long been predicted to bring change to the region. ■