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# After the Arab Spring: power shift in the Middle East?: conclusion: the Middle East after the Arab Spring

## Report

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# Conclusion: the Middle East After the Arab Spring

Toby Dodge

"After an evil reign, the fairest dawn is the first." Cornelius Tacitus, 109.

"As the fates of previous *journées révolutionnaires* warn us, spring is the shortest of seasons, especially when the *communards* fight in the name of a 'different world' for which they have no real blueprint or even idealized image." Mike Davis, 2011.

**The title of this report, 'After the Arab Spring: Power Shift in the Middle East?', deliberately ends with a question mark. The events over the year and a half since the death of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, have left the politics of the Middle East in tumult. The Arab Spring has certainly resulted in a change of regime in Tunisia and then Egypt. The uprisings against Gaddafi's regime triggered a military intervention by NATO that drove the Libyan leader and his entourage from power. Ali Abdullah Saleh finally relinquished his grip on power in Yemen. However, the ramifications of regime change for state-society relations in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya are still uncertain. Mubarak may be on trial, Gaddafi is dead and Ben Ali is currently enjoying the dubious pleasures of exile in Saudi Arabia. But the ruling elites they created, the state structures they built, the powerful secret services and crony capitalists they nurtured did not disappear when the despots were deposed. The post-revolutionary transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya are unlikely to deliver on the hopes that united the courageous protestors in their struggle. As Ewan Stein argues in this report, 'the utopian vision of Tahrir was soon tarnished'.**

Across the broader region, beyond Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Libya, the wave of protests emboldened by North African success were driven by similar demographic realities, failures of state policies and demands for greater representation. However, they failed to effect regime change. The Arab Spring was a historic moment in the politics of the Middle East but its long-term impact remains unpredictable.

George Lawson, in his piece for this report, makes three powerful points about how to best understand the ongoing dynamics unleashed by the Arab Spring. The first concedes that 'very few movements lead to successful revolutions'. The region is currently divided between four states in some form of post-revolutionary transition and the rest. Although some ruling regimes have faced systematic challenges, they have been able to repress the protestors and for the moment at least, contain demands for political change.

Central to the states now entering transition is Lawson's second point, the comparatively modest demands of most contemporary revolutionaries. With the decline in the popular influence of Marxism and state-driven agendas for revolutions from above, there has been a shift away from political mobilisation designed to push for social transformation. In their place revolutions have become 'self-limiting', focused on individual liberal political emancipation rather than collective economic transformation. The demands for full citizenship, for the recognition of individual political rights, were a powerful unifying theme across the Arab revolutions. However, now that four autocrats have been driven from power, the crucial questions at the centre of these transitions are as much economic as they are political.

How do the new ruling elites set about reorganising the economy to meet the unfulfilled aspirations of their populations?

This question is pressing. The 'authoritarian upgrading' that Steven Hyderman identified as a key strategy for regime survival across the Middle East during the 1980s and 1990s placed limited economic reforms at its centre. Using the rhetoric of neoliberalism to ingratiate themselves with the United States and the international community, Middle Eastern dictators sought to jettison the costly developmental promises which had once been key to their legitimation. As the state retreated from the economy, the indigenous bourgeoisie were brought back in; crony capitalists became a crucial, if junior member, of the ruling elite. This turn to neoliberal justifications for continued rule created an influential group of economic entrepreneurs who remain dominant in key sections of the Egyptian and Tunisian economy. Authoritarian upgrading also transformed the barriers between the public and the private, the state and the economy. This part-privatisation of powerful sections of the ruling elite became a region-wide phenomenon. However, post-regime change the legacy of this process is most problematic for the political transition in Egypt. For a brief but crucial period of time, the Egyptian military were celebrated by protestors in Tahrir Square for not unleashing their coercive power in support of Mubarak's continued rule. However, this act of omission was in part at least motivated by the threat the revolution posed to their economic interests. Mubarak's son Gamal was attempting to expand the grip of his own group of crony capitalists over the economy, thus encroaching on the military's own economic fiefdoms. The Janus-faced relationship that Field Marshall Muhammed Hussein Tantawi and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces have had with the Tahrir protestors since the removal of Mubarak has alternated between celebration and repression justified by sinister but hidden foreign conspiracies. This political schizophrenia is shaped by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces' desire to protect their control over up to 40 percent of the Egyptian economy.

It is essential to understand the role and influence of crony capitalists empowered by the old regimes because they may act as a counter-revolutionary force, as has been the case in Egypt.

A coalition of commercial interests, threatened by meaningful economic change could bring together the crony capitalists of the old regime with their allies and business partners still embedded in the highest ranks of the state's bureaucracy. Alternatively, and more likely, as has already happened in Egypt, major indigenous economic interests may use their collaborators within the state to place clear limits on how transformatory the post-revolutionary governments can be. This issue will overtly or covertly dominate the path regime transition takes, because the shock troops of those revolutions, the young people of Egypt and Tunisia, were motivated in large part by their own economic exclusion. The flagrant corruption of the old ruling elite had publicly expanded the chasm between the haves and have-nots within society. The post-revolutionary regimes have not to date shown any clear idea, beyond the neoliberal orthodoxy parroted by their predecessors, about how they will deliver meaningful growth. Mubarak and Ben Ali were partially successful in delivering economic growth, opening their economies to foreign direct investment and multi-national companies. However, the positive results of such neoliberal expansion were not felt across society.

The urban poor did not benefit from the *infitah* and the state-employed middle class were directly targeted by it. Neoliberal reforms produced a politically connected but small *nouveau riche*, with the majority of the population excluded and increasingly resentful. The transitional governments need to reformulate economic policies in a way that delivers meaningful growth to this previously alienated majority. This is especially problematic in Egypt, which has demographically passed the peak of its youth bulge, placing increasing numbers of young people on the job market. If the government fails to deliver hope to this section of society, there will be the temptation to revert to the tried and tested mechanisms of blaming uneven economic growth on the vagaries of the market. Coercion will then once again become the main tool used to demobilise an alienated youth, exposed to but excluded from the benefits of transnational capitalism.

The problems surrounding the delivery of meaningful economic growth leads on to Lawson's third point, the lack of 'contemporary revolutionary ideologies' binding these movements together and the fact that

they have '... little sense of what an alternative order would look like once such processes have taken place'. The internationally dominant cliché of an Arab Spring revolutionary was a young, network-savvy, college-educated member of the middle class. As Stein points out, the role that Facebook and other new technology played in the revolutions was much more complicated and inconclusive. The 'demonstration effect' which drove protest from Tunisia into Libya and Egypt and then on into the Gulf was powered by an older form of technology, satellite television. Al Jazeera was heralded as revolutionary when it launched in 1996. However, its long-term effects may if anything have been more influential. Broadly comparable to the Sawat al-Arab radio station under Nasser, Al Jazeera and other Arab satellite stations played a key role in recreating a region-wide Arab public sphere, which amplified the demonstration effect of Ben Ali's departure.

Furthermore, beyond a collective sense of endeavour and empowerment, the movements of the Arab Spring were not united by a concrete or programmatic agenda for post-regime change transformation. The results of the Egyptian elections certainly proved that Tahrir was not Egypt, but also went on to demonstrate that neither was Cairo. The dominance of Islamist Parties in the elections, taking 67 percent of the vote, came as no surprise. The Muslim Brotherhood were able to protect and even foster their nationwide organisation under the rule of both Sadat and Mubarak. The years of brutal suppression alternating with toleration and cooptation turned the Brotherhood into a cautious and, given its origins and early ideology, a comparatively moderate organisation. The size of its presence in parliament and its organisational ability has given it the capacity to counter-balance the Egyptian military and win early victories in the war of position that is now shaping the transition. That said, the Muslim Brotherhood's 'auto-reform', its transition under state repression from a militant revolutionary organisation to one committed to democracy, has not given it a clear or insightful programme for the transformation of the Egyptian economy in a way that can meet the aspirations of its voters or the third of Egyptian society aged between 15 and 30. There is a danger, as Fatima El-Issawi points out in her chapter on Tunisia, that the pressing demands for economic transformation will be sidelined and the

newly empowered but largely inexperienced political parties will fight over secondary issues, such as dress codes and the policing of morality, which they have clear positions on but which of themselves do not deliver hope for meaningful change or prosperity.

The final issue surrounding the outcomes of the Arab Spring is the coherence of the old ruling elites and their ability to suppress or buy off the challenges they faced. In two of the four regime changes, the removals of Ben Ali and Mubarak were facilitated by the fracturing of the ruling elite. In Tunis, Rachid Ammar, the Army Chief of Staff refused to open fire on the demonstrators in a similar way to Tantawi in Cairo. This left the armed forces in both countries intact and in a central position to influence the shape of the transition. In Libya, the country's armed forces were overcome through the heavy and extended support of NATO. The nature of that support led to a fracturing of the state's security forces but this was mirrored by the highly fractured nature of the militias fighting to remove Gaddafi. In Yemen, whilst the figurehead of the regime has been removed, competition for power between tarnished former elites dominates the political landscape.

Without key defections from within the higher echelons of the ruling elite or extended external military support, the youthful revolutionaries at the centre of the Arab Spring have proved unable to remove any other ruling elites across the Middle East. A year and a half after the start of the Arab Spring, successful revolutions have proved comparatively rare, even at the centre of what Perry Anderson labelled a 'new concatenation of political upheaval'; comparable to the Hispanic American wars of liberation that started in 1810, the European revolutions of 1848-9 and the fall of the Soviet backed regimes in Eastern Europe during 1989-91.

Against this background, it is now possible to start a discussion about what the aftermath of the Arab Spring may look like, what the long term effects of this movement could bring. As things stand, the Spring has given rise to three broad sets of outcomes. The first contains the majority of states in the region, and represents little or no change. From Saudi Arabia to Jordan, the ruling elites have managed through adjustments to their ruling strategies to stay in power and face down

the protestors. The second category of outcomes indicates a more evenly balanced contest between those mobilising for change and the regime (or remnants of the regime) themselves. This has however caused the countries concerned to descend into civil war. As things stand both Libya and Syria are in this category with Yemen a clear contender to join. Finally, there are those countries which are in the midst of a largely peaceful transition after regime change, Egypt and Tunisia.

The first category of states, those where the regimes have survived the challenge of popular protest, could be understood as embarking on a new round of 'authoritarian upgrading'. As the Arab Spring spread across North Africa and into the wider Middle East, ruling elites set about a reassessment of their formula for continued rule. This involved adjusting the balance between William Quandt's four pillars of authoritarianism, 'ideology, repression, payoffs, and elite solidarity'. In Bahrain, the Al-Khalifa ruling elite faced the most serious and sustained challenge to their rule in the Gulf region. As Christian Coates-Ulrichsen demonstrates in this report, their response was to unleash a sustained barrage of repression against those involved in the demonstrations. Thus 'the Bahraini government mercilessly pursued all forms of dissent, detaining doctors and lawyers merely for treating or representing detainees, suspending opposition political societies and arresting their leaders'. Once the ruling elite's primacy had been secured, they embarked upon a post-facto attempt to downplay, justify and minimise the brutal suppression they unleashed. A 'National Dialogue' was set up but the main opposition parties were deliberately under-represented, which begs the questions of who is allowed to be a member of the nation and what the dialogue was for? The regime then set up the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry, which to the surprise of many, turned out to be both independent and an inquiry! The report concluded that the authorities had indeed used excessive force and torture. It also undermined the ruling elite's central explanation for the protests, finding no evidence of Iranian involvement. The aftermath of the protests in Bahrain has left the government desperately trying to re-establish its international legitimacy but continuing to repress the majority of its population.

The balance of forces within the country, especially in the wake of Saudi intervention in support of the Al-Khalifas, means the regime itself faces no direct threat to its continued rule. However, in the aftermath of its extended and brutal crackdown, its carefully constructed decade-long attempt to portray itself as an open, fairly liberal base for multinational companies operating in the region lies in tatters. The population has become increasingly divided as the regime pandered to sectarian division as part of its survival strategy. This has solidified its base amongst the minority Sunni section of the population but may well constrain the regime's room for manoeuvre as Bahraini society is further partitioned.

The second category of states that have emerged from the Arab Spring are those that have descended into civil war, Libya and Syria. In the case of Libya, it is still not clear whether the highly precarious post-regime change situation will revert to civil war or stabilise into a potentially sustainable transition. The fact that Libya today has all the prerequisites of a failed state springs from the legacies of Gaddafi's rule, the way regime change was realised, and the actions of politicians and militia leaders in its aftermath. When he was murdered, Gaddafi bequeathed to the Libyan population a malfunctioning state, with weak governmental institutions and little or no civil society. Still traumatised by the extended quasi-imperial occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq, the leading proponents of military support for regime change in Paris, London and later Washington, were determined to limit involvement in terms of both 'boots on the ground' and overt military assistance. The historical legacy and the nature of NATO's actions has left a post-Gaddafi Libyan regime with spurious legitimacy and little capacity to influence events on the ground. Ranj Alaaldin, in this report, quite rightly describes the National Transition Council now seeking to run Libya as suffering from a 'series of deficiencies' a 'democratic deficit' and a number of geographical as well as secular-Islamist divisions. To add to the country's current woes, the International Crisis Group estimates that real military power lies with anything up to 100 militias containing 125,000 armed Libyans. This situation of a weak and under-legitimised government seeking to impose control over a myriad

of militias, fighting to retain their military power and geographic autonomy, does not bode well for the transition of Libya.

The balance of military forces in Syria, the second country in the region to enter civil war during the Arab Spring, is not yet as fractured as Libya. Chris Phillips details how Syria's President, Bashar al-Assad, systematically undermined the political base that his father Hafez had created during his thirty-seven years of rule. When faced with the beginnings of political discontent at the start of the Arab Spring, the ruling elite in Syria divided, with those favouring an all out assault on the demonstrators winning. As a result the extended military campaign by the Syrian army has been against largely urban-based protests across the country. The violence meted out by the regime quickly forced militarisation on its opponents. Local Coordination Committees were formed in dissenting communities to try and offer protection to the ongoing demonstrations, and consequently Syria descended into civil war. However, Phillips correctly designates the current situation as a stalemate. The regime is not militarily threatened by the revolt. The majority of the armed forces have stayed loyal and defections have not escalated to a point where the state's coherence is in doubt. However, unlike the last extended revolt the regime faced from 1979 to 1982, the regime does not have the coercive capacity to suppress the revolt. Its use of sectarian ideology has solidified its base amongst the Allawite community and fears of radical Islam and uncontrolled violence have forced other minority communities to offer their begrudging support. However, as the violence has continued, it is clear that an increasingly large section of the population has withdrawn its support or even passive tolerance from the regime. That said, the exiled organisation that was formed to represent the opposition, the Syrian National Council, has failed to establish coherent and meaningful links with the revolt within Syria, which remains highly localised and fractured.

Attempts at international mediation have so far failed to break this bloody stalemate. With the government showing no signs of compromise and the opposition largely incoherent, neither able to overthrow the regime nor enter into sustained negotiations,

the temptations for some form of military intervention comparable to Libya are increasing. That said, one hopes that the lessons of intervention in Iraq, where the aftermath of regime change was far more murderous than the military action itself, have not been completely forgotten.

The final set of countries to emerge from the Arab Spring, those that have moved into what are currently peaceful transitions away from dictatorial rule have been discussed in detail above. For all the troubles and uncertainties surrounding politics in Tunis and Cairo, when compared to the violence and instability in Syria and Libya and the ongoing post-Spring authoritarian upgrading across the rest of the region, Egypt and Tunisia continue to offer hope for the populations of the Arab world that sclerotic dictators can be overthrown and a better freer future is possible through political mobilisation.

The events of the Arab Spring have given hope to millions of people across the Middle East and beyond that meaningful political change for the better is a distinct possibility. That said, of all the Arab countries effected by this wave of political protest, only two, Egypt and Tunisia, are now in what looks like political transitions to a more representative form of government. Two more, Syria and Libya, were driven into civil war with Yemen also showing some signs of following them. The rest of the countries of the Middle East retain the ruling elites they had before the Arab Spring started. Successful revolutions are very rare indeed. ■