

Book Review: After the Spring: Economic Transitions in the Arab World

by Blog Admin

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*The Arab Spring constitutes perhaps the most far-reaching political and economic transition since the end of communism in Europe. For too long, the economic aspirations of the people in the region, especially young people, have been ignored by leaders in Arab countries and abroad. The authors of this book argue that significant economic reforms must accompany the major political transitions that are underway. **Luke McDonagh** finds this collection to be required reading as an account of the next steps that countries in the region should take.*



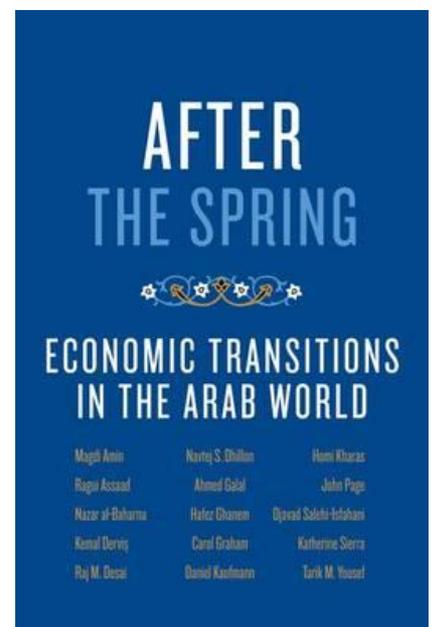
After the Spring: Economic Transitions in the Arab World. Magdi Amin et al. Oxford University Press. May 2012

The opening lines of *After The Spring* read: “The ongoing transitions in the Arab world are among the most dramatic events since the collapse of communism in Europe.” This volume, written by a set of Brookings Institution experts, provides a set of guidelines for this historical shift, noting that any political change must be accompanied by transition in the economic sphere.

However, it must be noted that in the time since the Brookings Institution held the conference that led to the writing of this text, during summer 2011, attitudes towards the Arab Spring have taken a decidedly pessimistic bent, particularly in the Western media. The oft-repeated story goes something like this: The previous comparable large scale regional shift – the peaceful transition of post-1989 Eastern European countries – happened in the early 1990s during an era of increasing world optimism about democracy and human rights. It also coincided with the release of decades of pent-up East European frustration at the politically repressive regimes and inefficient centrally planned economies behind the Iron Curtain. Therefore, given the fact that Western freedom represented all that the people of Eastern Europe were denied for so long, it was logical that there was at the time great enthusiasm for the Western agenda of liberal democracy and free markets. The European Union provided an immediate and acceptable model for countries such as Poland and the Czech Republic, which helped to smooth the transition.

On the other hand, so the story goes, these favourable conditions do not exist at present, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Instead, the on-going revolutions which began in late 2010 have the misfortune of occurring during an era when the West is recovering from, and beginning to transition out of, two failing paradigms – the much-maligned ‘war on terror’ era and the 1989-2008 economic era of unbridled neoliberalism. Meanwhile, the Western model of secular, liberal democracy combined with free market economics has apparently never been more unpopular in the Arab world. Politically the region is experiencing the flowering of an ‘Islamist moment’ that has been building for at least three decades, largely in defiance of the West. On the economic front the comparative failure of piecemeal liberalising reforms in the early 1990s means that Arab populations have little faith in the economic promises of neoliberalism and almost no trust at all in institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank.

As a result of this familiar story, many have become pessimistic about the possibilities for genuine political and economic change in the Arab world. The ongoing conflict in Syria also threatens stability in surrounding countries. However, when contemplating the futures of the Arab transitions we should acknowledge that



the transitions in Eastern Europe have themselves not been as smooth, or as peaceful, or as economically fruitful as commonly regarded by many. Taking a more sober view of the post-1989 European transition is worthwhile if it is to provide any guidance for the Arab world. It must be remembered that many of the post-1989 European transitions were extremely troubled, and some remain so. Romania only began its transition after a bloody rebellion and the execution of Ceaușescu. The post-Soviet Russian 'transition' was bungled so badly it has left huge swathes of the country's resources in the hands of the oligarchs, and led directly to the reactionary 'managed' democracy of Vladimir Putin. Belarus is still a repressive dictatorship. Over the past decade Ukraine has veered wildly between failed reformist governments and Putin-style authoritarians. The EU is currently taking legal action against Hungary over its controversial new constitution. Meanwhile, having fought a nasty, brutish and short war with Russia in 2008, Georgia has just elected a pro-Russian billionaire as its new leader. Most tragically of all, in his chauvinistic attempt to create an ethnically pure 'Greater Serbia' the dictator Slobodan Milosevic set Yugoslavia on the path to a series of appalling ethno-religious conflicts in the early 1990s, which led to atrocities on all sides, and which culminated in the longest siege in modern warfare history at Sarajevo and Europe's single biggest massacre since World War II at Srebrenica. While it is true that there have a number of economic success stories in Europe over the past two decades, not least the reunified Germany, Poland and the Czech Republic, the continued high level of income inequality between citizens of western European countries such as France and Britain, and Eastern European countries such as Romania and Bulgaria remains an embarrassment to the EU. Despite these troubles, there is an overriding sense that Europe has nonetheless moved in the right direction over the past two decades, and hopefully it will continue to do so, despite the recent debt crisis.

Similarly, the fact that political and economic progress has been piecemeal and fragmented in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen is not a cause for losing respect for the current 'revolutionary moment'. As is clearly illustrated by this effective book, the current picture for the Arab world ought not to be seen in an overly pessimistic light. While the transitions in all four of the above Arab countries have experienced serious problems, and some violence, as 'After the Spring' acknowledges, a 'revolution' was long overdue. The state apparatus in each country was rotten to the core, with cosseted elites able to benefit improperly and disproportionately from state fuel and food subsidies, while many young people could not find work. This book strongly advocates re-imagining the sphere of education as well the relationship between the private sector and the state in Arab countries.

This book notes that it is rare for countries in democratic transition to experience immediate economic success. As such, it will take time to successfully rebuild political institutions and re-invigorate the economic arenas in each country. The fact that genuinely free and fair elections have been recently held in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, coupled with similarly successful, though not untroubled, elections in Lebanon, the Palestinian territories and Iraq over the past decade proves that we are witnessing a democratic step forward for the Arab world, and one which seems unlikely to be reversed.

Other areas of political freedom, particularly women's rights and rights of religious minorities, remain in a precarious state and undoubtedly there is some genuine cause for concern on this front. Advocates of secular democracy in the Arab world are greatly troubled by the rise of the Islamist parties, but in many ways this simply reflects a dramatic trend across the region, including Turkey, a secular state which has become more Islamic as it has become more democratic.

On the economic front, it is clear there is a great difference between the way forward for the oil-rich countries in transition, such as Libya and Iraq, and labour-abundant countries such as Egypt, which lacks natural resources. Worryingly, the book notes that non-oil Arab exports amount to less than 1% of global trade. Moreover, at present intra-Arab trade is miniscule, while many Arab countries are net-food importers, something which makes them prone to food price 'shocks'. In this regard, the volume cites Brazil and especially Indonesia as examples of countries that have been able to use democratic reforms to transcend decades of corruption, nepotism and political repression to emerge with greatly improved levels of economic governance and reduced poverty rates. While the analysis in this book can be a little dry and prosaic at times, it should nonetheless be thought of as required reading as an account of the next steps that Arab countries should take.

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