



# The Spring of Arab Discontent

**T**HE “ARAB SPRING” produced a fleeting moment of moral clarity, particularly the moving scenes in Cairo’s Tahrir Square and Tunisia’s Avenue de Bourguiba. What could be more just than masses of civil-

ians demanding basic rights and freedoms, at the risk of imprisonment, injury or death? Their bravery and determination paid off, and inspired a similar dynamic of protests, crackdowns, and steadily escalating confrontations in numerous other countries.

Inevitably, the picture in Egypt and Tunisia is now more muddled, while elsewhere, leaders fight for their lives, often bloodily, and Arab states retool their foreign policies to cope with the newly fluid circumstances. Accordingly, the choices for ruling elites, civil societies and opposition movements, neighboring non-Arab states and Western powers alike are difficult.

Obviously, the exact mix of circumstances and range of choices vary from country to country. But in most places, the situation is underpinned by a common factor – discontent. Some of it, of course, is underpinned by deep-rooted economic and social difficulties – uncompetitive economies, corruption, high unemployment, particularly among their predominantly youthful populations, poverty, and huge disparities between haves and have-nots. Real improvement, especially in Egypt, will take years at best.

But Egyptians, widely known as easygoing, don’t appear ready to wait patiently, not after the euphoria of deposing their president. Moreover, the momentary social unity displayed in Tahrir Square is fraying at the seams. Activists are increasingly suspicious of the ruling military council’s intentions, and fear Mubarakism without Mubarak.

The military, for its part, continues to employ a heavy hand in repressing demonstrators, even to the point of occasionally killing them. Women’s groups and Copts fear the future, while the Muslim Brotherhood has, as expected, become increasingly assertive. As the best organized body outside of the government, it played an important role in generating a resounding ‘yes’ vote in the March 19 referendum for constitutional amendments that guaranteed parliamentary and presidential elections in September. Ironically, the other expected beneficiary of the early elections will be the ex-ruling NDP party, whose cohorts maintain the only other large-scale political network in the country. The democracy activists of Tahrir Square, who had campaigned against the proposals, were humbled by their defeat.

By comparison, the post-Ben Ali democratization transition in Tunisia appears to have a better chance of producing working representative institutions, which will enable social and political tensions to be effectively managed. As for the Iraqi democratization process, it has been going on for years, with mixed results at best. Even the usually stable Kurdish region has experienced violent unrest in recent weeks, and overall, Iraqi democracy is reminiscent of Lebanon’s, hardly an endorsement.

As for Bahrain, its Pearl Circle demonstrations had appeared to hold

the best possibility for launching a Tunisian/Egyptian copycat revolution. However, the Sunni monarchy, bolstered by the presence of the Saudi National Guard and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) contingents, has cracked down hard, framing the issue in sectarian, Sunni-Shiite terms. The Saudis were especially supportive of the clampdown, owing to concern that their own restive Shiite minority nearby might be emboldened by Bahraini Shiite protesters.

For all of the Gulf monarchies, the shadow of Shiite Iran looms large in their calculations. And confidence in their traditional US patron was shaken, particularly in Riyadh, by Washington’s failure to stand foursquare behind its longtime Egyptian ally, Hosni Mubarak. As a result, American counsel for reform and dialogue in Bahrain was demonstratively met by the dispatch of GCC troops and a crackdown on the protesters.

Elsewhere, public discontent is even more rampant, and the confrontations fiercer. In Libya, Western intervention, legitimized by the Arab League and the UN Security Council, has essentially rescued the Libyan rebels from defeat, but the prospects of a violent and unstable stalemate loom large. As with Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi, Yemen’s embattled President Ali Abdallah Saleh has suffered from defections of key supporters, while remaining defiant in the face of domestic and international efforts to ease him out of power before the country, long a failed state in any case, rips itself apart.

Yemen has always been sui generis among Arab states, owing to its geographical remoteness, and particular tribal and religious mix. A rare reliable indication of Yemeni public opinion is provided by a scientific research survey conducted in January-February by the US-based Glevum Associates. Not surprisingly, Yemenis are angry: only 3 percent of those asked believe that things were heading in the right direction, with 88 percent saying the wrong direction. (By comparison, in a similar survey in Iraq, the breakdown was 41 percent right, 56 percent wrong.) Dissatisfaction with Saleh’s performance and with government services was widespread, with majorities believing that oil production does not benefit the people and that the regime is not Islamic enough. A sizable minority (39 percent) believed that it does not respect the sanctity of Muslim blood.

The nightmare scenario for generations of Arab nationalist leaders and activists has been the fragmenting of Arab states into a multitude of warring ethnic and sectarian entities. In Sudan, it has already happened, although Sudan was never a “pure” Arab state, ethnically and linguistically. Neither is Iraq, for that matter. Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Libya, each in its own fashion, are potential candidates to follow.

Syria is not yet in that category, but the historic “beating heart of Arabism” is entering into uncharted waters. The repeated employment of deadly force against unbowed and increasingly militant demonstrators threatens to boomerang, while the country’s ruling elite apparently is divided over what the appropriate response should be. President Bashar Assad has weathered many regional tests during his nearly 11 years of rule. This latest one is of a different sort, with history offering no guide as to the outcome.

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