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## **The Arab Spring and Sub-Saharan Africa**

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The region-wide wave of popular protests that started in the North African states of Tunisia and Egypt quietly passed over most of the Sub-Saharan countries. Apart from a small-scale anti-governmental demonstration in Djibouti (nominally, an Arab League member), it seems that the cascading challenges to Arab regimes across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) did not have any noticeable effect on their sub-Saharan African (SSA) neighbors. What might be the reasons for this? And is there anything in the sub-Saharan experience which might serve to guide our understanding of the unfolding events in the MENA region?

One substantive reason for the lack of massive popular protest in SSA is the fact that, unlike MENA region, SSA states began democratizing their political systems during the 1990s, from Benin in 1991 to Nigeria in 1999. Hence, most have had some experience in establishing democratic regimes, albeit with varied degrees of success. In the past decade, signs of successful democratization, such as properly conducted competitive elections and constitutional reforms, resulted in the establishment of functioning democratic regimes in Ghana and South Africa, for example.

The fact that sub-Saharan African countries succeeded, in some cases, in establishing working democracies, contrasts with conventional thinking on the subject which holds that there is a correlation between well-to-do countries and the prospects for gaining and keeping democracy. In contrast, wealthy and non-democratic Arab countries like Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, prove the absence of such a correlation.

In his illuminating article, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?," Larry Diamond puts forth a number of factors that have underpinned the Arab Spring protests. Among them are the "Arab states themselves, who reinforce one another in their authoritarianism and their techniques of monitoring, rigging, and repression, and who over the decades have turned the 22-member Arab League into an unapologetic

autocrats' club. Of all the major regional organizations, the Arab League is the most bereft of democratic norms and means for promoting or encouraging them. In fact, its charter, which has not been amended in half a century, lacks any mention of democracy or individual rights."<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to the Arab League, the African Union, established in 2002, seems much more committed to issues of democratization and human rights. Compared with its predecessor, the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the AU has been much more resolute in condemning non-constitutional governmental shifts, and has actively intervened to ensure the implementation of such processes, for example, in Burundi in 2003 and the Comoros Islands in 2008. To be sure, the AU has not been entirely consistent in this regard (e.g. its mild response to Robert Mugabe's unwillingness to step down from power after losing the 2008 elections in Zaire). Still, until recently at least, the African Union's emphasis on the limits of state sovereignty and the public's right to democracy and freedom is much more pronounced than that of the Arab League. One of the recent examples was the AU's stance in the case of Ivory Coast. Following the incumbent President Laurent Gbagbo's refusal to recognize the victory of the Northern contender Alassane Ouattara in the November 2010 elections, the African Union Peace and Security Council suspended Ivory Coast from participation in its activities, and declared its unequivocal support for the Ivorian people's right to determine their own political future. Moreover, the West African bloc ECOWAS, led by Nigeria, has threatened to use force if Gbagbo does not recognize the results announced by the Ivorian electoral commission chief and step down.

The African Union's reactions to the latest events in Libya, however, raise some doubts regarding the degree of commitment by SSA leaders to defend civilian populations against the atrocities perpetrated by their leaders. On the one hand, three African members of the Security Council voted for Resolution #1973, establishing a no-fly zone over Libya and authorizing attacks on Libya's air defenses and other targets. On the other hand, the ad-hoc High Level AU Panel on Libya proclaimed on March 20, the day after the military attack began, its support for Libya's unity and territorial integrity and rejection of any kind of foreign military intervention. Complicating matters is the fact that Mu`ammar Qaddafi, the immediate past president of the AU, provided crucial funding for a number of AU regimes. As matters currently stand, South African President Jacob Zuma is heading an AU diplomatic effort to devise an end to the war, with some reports suggesting that it will include an asylum offer to the Libyan leader.

What lessons can the African experience teach us about the future of Arab protest movements? First, sub-Saharan experimentation with democracy and democratization proves that democratization doesn't automatically result in the creation of a stable and prosperous society. Indeed, the transition from autocratic to democratic regimes has often been accompanied by the reemergence of old divisions, resulting in periods of instability, violence and general deterioration of human conditions. The bloody aftermath of the April 16<sup>th</sup> electoral victory of Goodluck Jonathan and his People's Democratic Party (PDP) in Nigeria — one of many bloody clashes since the state's transition to democracy in 1999 — is a good example of this. The most obvious reason for rising tensions was the regional split between North and South, which is

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Diamond, "Why Are There No Arab Democracies?" *Journal of Democracy*, 21 (1), January 2010, pp. 93-112.

related to the religious divisions between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria. Indeed, many of the claims against Goodluck Jonathan, a Christian from the south, were raised by his chief rival, Muhammadu Buhari, a Muslim from the north. Although the accusations were mainly of electoral malpractice, they were underpinned by deeper grievances and fears related to the continuing dominance of the Christian South in Nigeria. More generally, the country's rising levels of unrest and violence stemmed from an expressed widespread disappointment in successive PDP governments and their failure to improve security, the economy, and prospects for the future of most Nigerian youths. Many Nigerians are dissatisfied with what 12 years of democracy have brought. Nonetheless, they are able to express their dissatisfaction more freely than in the past, which presumably has some sort of ameliorating effect.

Second, the various experiences in democratization can offer some insights regarding the possible future course of events in the MENA region. Michael Bratton argues that, according to the African experience, there are some factors that can predict the success of transition to democracy. Among other factors, he includes the importance of cohesion among the opposition, previous experiences with political competition, the strength of civil society, and the disposition of the military.<sup>2</sup> Bratton finds that a successful transition to democracy is less possible in countries where regimes are not dependent on foreign aid, particularly the oil-rich countries. The so-called "oil curse" is responsible for the formation of strong states with repressive capabilities, as well as geopolitical alliances. Indeed, among the few sub-Saharan states unwilling to make even slight modifications of their autocratic systems are the oil producers Gabon and Equatorial Guinea.

On the other hand, Bratton also finds that the emergence of even a single democratic polity can encourage the formation of other democracies in the region, pointing to post-apartheid South Africa, which inspired many sub-Saharan states to follow its example of transitioning to democracy. In the MENA region, successful democratization in Egypt, in particular, seems likely to have a similar effect. Moreover, following the example of the African Union, it seems that changes in attitudes regarding the public's right to democracy and the illegitimacy of repressive regimes, combined with the creation of adequate regional and international mechanisms for imposing sanctions on repressive governments, might eventually prompt MENA regimes to engage in more genuine political reform.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Bratton, "Arab Uprisings: Lessons from Africa", *United States Institute of Peace*, April 21, 2011.

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