

A Decade of Demonstrations and Protest Movements in the Arab World¹

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Recourse to protest as a tool for expression and civic engagement has intensified worldwide over the last decade, exposing the crisis of representation systems and the transformations taking place in the relations between governments and their citizens. In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), considered the world's most unequal region (Assouad, 2020), the number of protests between 2009 and 2019 increased 16.5% (Brannen, Haig & Schmidt, 2020).

The region is no exception to a global trend that grew more pronounced in 2019 with protests erupting around the world (the *gilets jaunes* or “yellow vests” in France, Hong Kong, Chile, Iran, South Africa, etc.). This wave of protests is driven by widening inequality, the rejection of corruption, a growing awareness of regional differences in wealth within countries, and the questioning of political regimes that are unable to meet their citizens' welfare and social justice expectations.

In Sudan, in December 2018, rising bread and petrol prices sparked protests that culminated, five months later, in the ouster of President Omar al-Bashir, after 30 years in power, and the start of a transition process agreed with the army. In Algeria, in February 2019, the rejection of a fifth term for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika triggered a grassroots protest

movement that called non-stop, week after week, for the complete overhaul of the political and military system that has controlled the country since its independence in 1962. In Iraq, the protest movement began in October 2019, with an agenda demanding the end of the ethno-sectarian quota-based political system known as *mahasasa* that was put into place in the country after the US-led invasion in 2003. The resignation of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi in late November failed to defuse a movement that also questions Iran's interference in the country's internal affairs. In Lebanon, the protests that began on 17 October were ignited by the announcement of a new tax on phone calls made over WhatsApp. The demands quickly evolved into a condemnation of sectarianism as the foundation for the political system, as well as of the economic stagnation, unemployment and endemic corruption plaguing the country. Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation and his replacement by the former Education Minister Hassan Diab at the head of a government of technocrats did not stop protests driven by the deteriorating economic and financial situation.

The protests that, in 2019, threatened the regimes of these four Arab countries need to be understood within the context of a long-standing cycle of protests that began in the region in December 2010, when the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a young fruit vendor in Tunisia, unleashed a wave of anti-authoritarian uprisings that were echoed in other countries in the region (Hernando de Larramendi, 2011).

So, although the activists use different Arabic terms to define themselves (*Intifada*, *Hirak*, *Zaura*), the

¹ Manuscript completed on 1 June 2020.

² This article is part of the results of the R&D project “Crisis and Regional Change Processes in North Africa: Implications for Spain” (CSO2017-84949-C3-3-P), funded by the Spanish Ministry of the Economy, Industry and Competitiveness (MINECO), the Spanish State Research Agency (AEI) and the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF).

root causes of the 2019 uprisings are not new. Since the turn of the century, the *Arab Human Development Reports* published by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and written by Arab authors in direct contact with the region have highlighted the increasing inequality, lack of freedoms, difficulties for young people to join the labour market and growing education and gender gaps.

Despite the findings of these reports, social issues took a back seat on the regional agenda following the 2001 terrorist attacks against the Twin Towers in New York. The “war on terrorism” launched by the Bush Administration placed security issues at the top of the international agenda. By collaborating in the fight against al-Qaeda, the Arab regimes – which, in many cases, had updated their authoritarianism in the wake of the Cold War through processes of controlled political liberalization – were able to circumvent the pressures of the United States and its “Great Middle East” project, through which the Bush Administration sought to export democratic values as a tool for combatting terrorism.

At the same time, the effects of the economic liberalization processes promoted by international financial institutions and the European Union accelerated the breakdown of the “authoritarian social contract” whereby the Arab regimes tacitly obtained the political support of their citizens in exchange for offering them socio-economic benefits. The income generated by the privatization processes was amassed by the elites, giving rise to “buddy capitalism” even as structural adjustment policies legitimized the implementation of austerity measures.

The emphasis placed on macroeconomic indicators, taken out of their social context, prevented proper interpretation of the signs of growing unrest that were being sent out through sectoral protests. These protests left behind an accumulation of collaborative experience that facilitated the development of the anti-authoritarian protests of 2011 (the unemployed university graduate movements in Morocco and Tunisia, the *tansiqiyat* in Morocco, the Gafsa Mining Basin protests in Tunisia in 2008, or the mobilization of textile workers in Mahalla al-Kubra in Egypt, in 2006).

The Politicization of the Fight against Inequality

The difficulty of meeting these demands for socio-economic equity, exacerbated by the start of the economic and financial crisis in 2008, coupled with a surge in global food prices, weakened the regimes’ legitimacy by aggravating inequalities, leading to a “politicization of the fight against inequality” that is not exclusive to the Arab countries but rather, as noted, is a global trend.

Disgust with authoritarian political regimes and rich and corrupt elites who captured the income from the economic liberalization processes was one of the drivers of the anti-authoritarian protests of 2011; it continued to be one in 2019. This disgust partially explains the enthusiastic response, in various Egyptian cities, to the calls³ to protest the corruption of President Al-Sisi spread on social media in September by a businessman and former army contractor exiled in Spain.

The external perception of the protests, however, has changed (Fahmi, 2019). In 2011, the wave of protests that swept across most of the region’s countries was viewed from the outside as an historic event, compared by some analysts to the fall of the Berlin Wall, that could give rise to a new democratizing paradigm in the region. In contrast, in 2019, the protests in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon failed to attract the media attention received by other protest movements, such as those in Hong Kong or Chile.

The Protest Cycle in the Arab World (2010-2019)

Socioeconomic malaise does not crystallize into political protest overnight. The protests that took place in Sudan, Algeria, Lebanon and Iraq in 2019 did not come out of nowhere. They were the result of built-up frustrations that had given rise to micro-and low-intensity protests related to socioeconomic issues (access to employment, interruptions in public services such as electricity, rubbish collection, water supply, etc.). Some of these protests were largely

³ www.youtube.com/watch?v=LabeA7ML4lw&app=desktop.

invisible as they took place in peripheral areas far from the big cities, where protest movements had been concentrated in earlier decades. In Algeria, the Hirak movement draws on the prior organizing experience of the Kabylia protests, as well as that of the protest movement against shale gas exploitation in the south of the country. In Sudan, the movement builds on the accumulated experience of the Sudanese Professionals Association, created in 2016 by teachers, journalists, doctors and lawyers. In Lebanon, the protests are connected to the “You Stink” movement, from 2015, which questioned the government’s dysfunction in the provision of basic services such as rubbish collection. The “October Revolution” in Iraq has resurrected the demands of protestors from the Basra region in 2018 in response to environmental degradation and cuts in the supply of drinking water and electricity.

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The cycle of protests that began a decade ago is transforming the political culture of Arab societies that have overcome the “fear barrier,” casting doubt on their supposed “political apathy,” “fatalism” and “conformism.” The memory of traumatic and violent experiences from their recent history is no longer an obstacle to mobilization. The memory of the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), the Algerian Civil War (1992-1997) or the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the scars left by the fight against Daesh have not prevented a new generation of young people from taking to the streets to call for the fall of the respective regimes.

In 2011, citizens (“the people”) emerged as a political subject in the face of weakened parties in political systems discredited by the failed experiences of political liberalization, limited representation and an inability to transform the authoritarian structures of the state. This collective reaffirmation of the people as a political actor was encapsulated in one of the slogans first chanted in Tunisia and subsequently re-

peated in the demonstrations that took place in other countries in the region: الشعب يريد اسقاط النظام, “the people want the regime to fall.”

The example of what happened in Egypt after the restoration of authoritarianism following the 2013 coup has fuelled protest agendas that will not settle for cosmetic tweaks, but rather call for the complete overhaul of political systems. The lesson learnt from the 2010 protests was that the fall of the leaders does not mean the fall of the regimes. The slogans – *Yetnahawгаа* (They All Should Go) in Algeria and كلن يعني كلن (All of them means all of them) in Lebanon – clearly reflects a desire for a radical break with the regimes that goes beyond replacing some leaders with others.

The 2019 protests highlight the limitations of the seasonal “Arab Spring” metaphor for describing a cycle of protests with different triggers, tempos, rhythms and scope that will foreseeably remain active until the root causes driving them are addressed. The demonstrations in countries in which the 2011 protests had a limited impact once again place the people and their expectations of change at the centre. The attention that had been diverted to conflicts such as Syria, the resilience of the authoritarian states and the “counter-revolutions” supported by the Gulf countries, the threat to regional security posed by the fight against Daesh and the increase in regional geopolitical rivalries, has shifted back to society and to the people’s determination to transform the regimes peacefully.

As in 2011, the re-appropriation of public spaces, transformed into a new civic forum, has become the terrain in which these new social movements, which have no specific ideology beyond their anti-establishment agenda, make themselves visible and take on regimes of both a military nature (Algeria and Sudan) and a civilian and sectarian one (Lebanon and Iraq), challenging the social and political order. The protest strategies are not uniform. The occupation of emblematic urban spaces such as Tahrir Square in Baghdad, which enables access to the Green Zone where the government offices are located, was replaced, in Algeria, by mass demonstrations in the country’s main cities, without permanent occupation of public squares. The recourse to protests is driven by the insufficiency and limitations of the responses given by the elites to a protest agenda that questions the political status quo and calls for a profound transformation of economic and social re-

lations. The priority given in 2011 to institutional reforms by those who assumed power (enactment of new Constitutions and holding of elections) helped polarize the societies of Egypt and Tunisia without addressing the underlying problems that lay at the origin of the protests. Even Tunisia, the country that has achieved the most milestones in its process of democratic transition, is facing the challenge of a growing disaffection towards the political class. This disaffection gave rise to an “electoral insurrection” in the presidential election of September 2019, in which Kais Saied, an outsider who advocated the need to respond to social justice demands, replacing the semi-parliamentarian political system with one based on direct democracy, was elected with 72% of the votes (López García and Hernando de Larramendi, 2020).

In Iraq and Lebanon, the holding of legislative elections in 2018 did not prevent protests that, since they began in October 2019, have called for the radical transformation of the system prior to the holding of new elections. In Algeria, the holding of a presidential election, imposed by the military in December 2019 in search of an institutional solution to the crisis, was perceived by the Hirk as a trick through which the army sought to reproduce the system; it was countered by a low turnout of less than 40%.

Characteristics and Common Features of the Wave of Protests in 2019

The existence of a protest agenda of a national scope that goes beyond local and sectoral demands and interests has strengthened the protest movements. To better organize and endow itself with clear leadership, the resistance has established itself as a strategic option and an instrument of self-protection for protests that draw their strength from an ideological mainstreaming that transcends identity (Amazighs in Algeria), sectarian (in Iraq and Lebanon) and gender boundaries. However, this approach often hinders its ability to articulate political alternatives and establish mechanisms of convergence with other institutionalized political and social actors, such as political parties and unions. In Algeria, for example, the Hirk movement’s decision to maintain a horizontal structure with no clear leadership is heavily influenced by the experience of infiltration, cloning and neutraliza-

tion suffered by civil society activists during the country’s civil war (Thieux, 2019).

Another characteristic shared by the protest movements arising in these four countries – Algeria, Lebanon, Iraq and Sudan – has been their clear and determined commitment to a peaceful path (*silmitya*). With this option, they aim to avoid providing justification for their repression. This strategy has not prevented the regimes from using force to suppress the protests, which, in Iraq, resulted in 600 deaths between October 2019 and February 2020. In Sudan, security forces killed 77 people between December 2018 and April 2019. A concentration in front of the army headquarters was brutally repressed by paramilitary forces in June 2019, causing more than a hundred deaths in a single day (Amnesty International, 2019).

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Another common feature of the protests is their affirmation of the national through their embrace of state symbols. The appropriation of the national flag allows them to federate around a collective identity, forged beyond the diversity of the actors, a patriotic unit of a civil society nature that questions the regimes, but not the states (Billion and Ventura, 2020). The use of national flags both in activists’ personal social media profiles and at demonstrations and rallies makes it possible to symbolize the existence of a collective actor – the people – in opposition to the ruling elites. In Algeria, the national flag has co-existed at the Hirk’s weekly marches with the Amazigh flags. In Lebanon and Iraq, the use of the national flag reflects a clear rejection of the sectarian structure and the interference of other countries, such as Iran, in internal affairs. In Sudan, the national flag since 1970 has been flown alongside the tricolour flag (blue, yellow and green) that was the country’s official flag from its independence until Jaafar Nimeiry’s 1969 coup.

Although they are national in nature, the movements are connected with the outside world through social

media and digital platforms. This connection can be seen in the use of slogans and posters in various languages full of references to global consumer culture. In Algeria, the protests held every Tuesday and Friday for 52 weeks were extremely creative in their references to brand names, songs, films and television series such as *La Casa de Papel* (literally, “The House of Paper”; translated as *Money Heist* in English). The latter served as the inspiration for one of the Hirak movement’s anthems, created by a group of fans of one of the capital’s football teams. “La casa del Muradiya” is a play on words between the name of the presidential palace and the original title of the hit Netflix series. These connections are also visible in one of the tunnels leading to Tahrir Square in Baghdad, which has been turned into a revolutionary art gallery featuring a collection of graffiti,⁴ including many pieces by women and with references to global protest movements. The appropriation of the global agenda is likewise reflected in references to environmental and feminist issues. For example, the performance piece “A Rapist in Your Path,” by the Chilean group Las Tesis, which became a global feminist anthem against gender-based violence, was re-enacted⁵ in the demonstrations in Beirut in December 2019.

The Impact of the Covid-19 Crisis

Although the health impact of Covid-19 has varied from one country to the next, the economic and social repercussions have affected all the Arab states, leaving the non-oil exporters that depend on remittances sent by their emigrants, tourism and exports of low value-added products to developed country markets more exposed (Amirah-Fernández, 2020). The lockdowns and curfews imposed as preventive health measures to slow the spread of the epidemic have temporarily halted the street protests, offering the regimes opportunities to implement extraordinary measures to shut down the movements in the short term.

In Algeria, after some initial hesitation due to the deep distrust generated by the regime’s decisions,

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the Hirak chose to pull back, a decision the authorities used to ramp up the repression of activists, journalists, authors of Facebook posts and independent media outlets (Oussama Bounab, 2020). To counteract this withdrawal from the street, the Hirak has sought to leverage the opportunities offered in the virtual arena with calls for Tuesday and Friday demonstrations on social media. The pirate radio station Radio Corona Internationale⁶ broadcasts on Facebook with the aim of keeping the flame and spirit of the protest movement alive. The Hirak has also undertaken solidarity initiatives, outside the government’s efforts, to tackle the economic and social impact of measures that have hit the population that depends on the informal economy hardest. In Lebanon, the government took advantage of the declaration of a state of emergency to remove the infrastructure used for the occupation of public spaces. The worsening economic crisis that led the country to default on debt payments in early March, exacerbated by the pandemic, prompted the reactivation, in late April, of the street protests and violent clashes with the army in the city of Tripoli. In Iraq, although the protests waned in intensity as a result of the lockdown measures, the most emblematic sites of the protests, such as Tahrir Square in Baghdad, were never completely emptied of protestors. The activists who persisted in occupying those places, taking turns and establishing health and safety protocols, took to the streets again in early May. Their return coincided with the appointment of Mustafa al-Kadhimi as the new Prime Minister after Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi and Adnan al-Zurfi failed in their attempts to form a government.

The evolution of the protest movement will depend on how states respond to the crisis, on how these

⁴ www.theguardian.com/global-development/gallery/2019/nov/26/murals-of-baghdad-the-protest-art-in-pictures.

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=85MJZHxwpXY.

⁶ www.facebook.com/Radiocoronadz/.

responses are perceived by the people and on their ability to effectively improve the living conditions of the population, in short, their ability to reduce inequalities and renew the social contracts in a context in which the State's role as a provider of basic services has been reinforced.

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