

# Asia and the Arab Spring

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As revolution swept through the Middle East and North Africa in 2011, the state of democratic reform in Asia was also in flux. While the sources of change in the region were primarily endogenous, events in the Near East exerted some surprising influences. None of these countries experienced Arab Spring-style uprisings, but the politics, imagery, tactics and fallout of the Arab Spring did resonate in these contexts. In examining the impact of the Arab Spring in Asia, this paper looks in particular at its influence on three countries – China, Burma and Malaysia – and offers some general observations on the region as a whole. Because these three countries all experienced an internal political movement that was somehow shaped by events in the Middle East, they provide a useful snapshot of how the Arab Spring was experienced by the region.

### **China: Crackdown at Home, Flexibility Abroad**

The Arab Spring presented particular challenges to the Chinese government at home and abroad. China shares some of the characteristics that spurred uprisings across the Middle East last year: a despotic political culture; endemic corruption and ruling elite cronyism; growing economic inequality; and rising expectations, particularly among educated urban youth struggling to realise them. At the same time, the conventional wisdom is that China's leadership has successfully managed these challenges through a combination of robust economic growth and nationalism, supported by effective technocratic au-

thoritarian rule. Economic growth has given and continues to give the regime a substantial cushion. The central authorities have been remarkably effective in channelling popular discontent toward local authorities, so that the Chinese people largely do not connect their quotidian grievances about corruption, lawlessness and inequity with the underlying political system. Regular rotation of top leaders helps to diminish the personalisation of autocracy. While censorship can be grating, it is also extremely sophisticated.

As successful as China has apparently been, the half-life of Chinese leadership legitimacy nonetheless has been shrinking since Mao. After anonymous online calls for Chinese to launch "Jasmine Revolution" protests appeared in February 2011, the authorities expanded their ongoing crackdown on dissent. The Arab Spring reinforced one lesson China learned from its own ample experience with protest: the need to defuse conflicts before they gain broader traction. The Chinese authorities have thus devoted substantial resources to the domestic security sector to ensure they have the capability to interdict trouble. The ongoing arrests and harsh treatment of dissidents, artists, lawyers and other activists, and the increasing difficulty of handling ostensibly non-political protests throughout 2011, however, fed a perception that the party-state was struggling with the costs of managing these challenges. The abrupt sacking of the populist neo-Maoist Politburo member Bo Xilai in March 2012 forced many China watchers to question their assumptions about the internal stability and cohesion of the ruling elite. As the party-state struggles to rebalance China's economy, and to slow runaway growth in the process, the internal pressures on the regime will only increase.

The Chinese authorities' task is further complicated because they – like their Middle Eastern counterparts – are operating in a wired world. Urban areas of China

have a high level of Internet and mobile connectivity, and smartphones have had a revolutionary impact on the kind of information that can be shared nationwide in an instant. On Chinese micro-blogs such as Sina's Weibo, and other online outlets, Chinese "netizens" use clever wordplay and tech savvy to spoof and expose the corruption and weakness of China's leadership. Even new requirements announced in 2011 that Weibo users must register under their real names have not squelched the raucous, often edgy online discourse. The vociferous public reaction to a deadly high-speed train crash in July 2011 was a perfect storm of frustration with corrupt imperious officialdom, infantilising and self-serving official censorship, and the unexamined costs of China's breakneck economic development model.<sup>1</sup>

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Chinese citizens also demonstrated an increased willingness to stand up to authorities. For example, the remarkable year-end stand off between the authorities and the villagers of Wukan arose after a dispute over land rights got out of hand.<sup>2</sup> The Wukan villagers used non-violent resistance to deny authorities physical access to the village, while displaying a media savvy and rights consciousness that kept the government off balance. The "siege of Wukan" was only the highest-profile example of the growing number of public confrontations between the populace and the authorities taking place every day across China. The improvisational quality of the leadership's responses indicates a level of uncertainty about how to deal with these challenges.

From an international perspective, China's foreign policy approach has been repeatedly challenged by the events of the Arab Spring. While the conservative elements of Chinese foreign policy are sometimes clumsy in dealing with periods of fluidity, the

offsetting pragmatism allows Beijing to quickly abandon detrimental "old friends" once it is certain they are no longer useful. Following Deng Xiaoping's instruction that China should "keep a low profile, hide its brightness, and bide its time," China kept itself largely aloof from these issues, content to hang back and let Western democracies and regional players set the tone. Nonetheless, the desire to "hide brightness" came into stark conflict with the need to rescue nearly 38,000 Chinese nationals threatened by hostilities in Libya. The Chinese rescue operation was extremely impressive, and won the government plaudits at home, but also demonstrated how China's integration into the global economy has created new foreign policy risks that threaten its historic posture of non-intervention. Likewise, the competing agendas within China's foreign policy were highlighted by reports that Chinese arms merchants had been in contact with the Gaddafi regime after the UN passed an arms embargo on it. China had only reluctantly supported the UN arms embargo of Libya under substantial pressure from African and Arab countries – a big step away from its traditional non-interference policies. When UN Security Council Resolution 1973 was tabled, authorising a no-fly zone in Libya, China saw the UN action as a cover for regime change and abstained. China has subsequently joined with Russia to block meaningful Security Council action on Syria.

The international and domestic implications of China's involvement in the Arab Spring also were reflected in how the Chinese state media covered these events. The swift collapse of apparently stable authoritarian regimes presented a major challenge to even Beijing's sophisticated propaganda apparatus. Throughout the dramatic events of the Arab Spring, state media were ordered to focus on China's successful rescue operations, and the chaos and danger of foreign intervention that resulted from grassroots uprisings demanding greater freedom and democracy. Beijing's prickly reaction to nascent democratisation in neighbouring Burma likewise demonstrated its increasing difficulty in balancing concerns about the possibility of domestic contagion from others' political liberalisation with the need to maintain good relations with key regional players.

<sup>1</sup> J.M. "Interrogating the Party." *The Economist*, 25 July 2011, [www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/07/chinas-high-speed-train-crash](http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/07/chinas-high-speed-train-crash); and CUSTER, Charles "Han Han: The derailed country," *China Geeks*, 28 July 2011, <http://chinageeks.org/2011/07/han-han-the-derailed-country/>.

<sup>2</sup> "China's Wukan Experiment." *The Wall Street Journal*, 3 February 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB100014240529702038889904577198433883098856.html>.

## Burma: Coming in from the Cold

Burma's 2011 moves towards greater freedom and democracy were potentially on par with other Arab Spring events in their magnitude, even as they occurred in radically different fashion. Burma's military elite initiated a top-down transition process that included unimaginable gestures toward the democratic opposition and broadly expanded personal freedoms. While internal factors were the key drivers of reform, leaders from the government and the democratic opposition have cited the Arab Spring as influential in the changes that have taken place in Burma.

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Burma has much in common with the struggling countries that led the Arab Spring. It failed to thrive even as neighbours lacking Burma's natural advantages steadily advanced towards middle-income status. Like Libya, Burma was long a pariah state subject to an array of sanctions that kept it isolated from the democratic West, but did little to harm relations with its neighbours. It reportedly was even pursuing a nuclear capability.<sup>3</sup> Repressive and autarkic governance was the chief culprit in Burma's misery and isolation, but abundant natural resources, including gas, precious gems and teak, ensured the ruling elite never experienced the widespread deprivation produced by its gross economic mismanagement. The regime's brutal suppression of 2007 protests led by Burma's revered monks ripped away its few remaining shreds of legitimacy. Its grossly incompetent initial response to the devastation of Cyclone Nargis in May 2008 came as no surprise to the Burmese people, who by that point expected nothing but predation from their government. Like Egypt, Burma held a heavily manipulated election in November 2010. When a nominally civilian

government took office in March 2011, expectations were low that it would be more than a veneer of legitimacy for continued military rule. Instead, under general-turned-President Thein Sein, Burma appears to have launched itself on a course of political and economic reform. As the Arab Spring unfolded, Burmese and Western analysts believe Thein Sein argued that Burma was destined to see similarly chaotic uprisings unless it moved forward with a managed transition towards democracy. Burma's generals and their cronies were reportedly sensitive to arguments that they – and their wealth – would be safer under such a transition than an uncontrolled popular uprising. Moreover, a key driver of change in Burma is a pervasive sense that it was falling behind its neighbours – a sentiment that also resonated among the young Egyptians in Tahrir Square. Democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, while expressing admiration for and shared ideals with her fellow democrats across the Middle East, has urged that Burma move forward with a peaceful transition.

As with transitions underway across the Middle East and North Africa, things can easily go sideways or backwards. Ms Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), are preparing to enter parliament and take their democratic struggle into a new phase. Many Burmese political activists continue to be inspired by the popular movements of the Arab Spring, however, and may not have the same patience to work through the flawed system. Between now and parliamentary elections in 2015, there will be many opportunities to see whether Burma stays on its current path of managed transition or veers off onto something that looks more like the Arab Spring.

## Malaysia: Taking Inspiration, Getting Compromise

The socio-political movement in Asia most clearly inspired by the Arab Spring was the Bersih ("clean") 2.0 protests in Malaysia. The Bersih movement was formed by a loose coalition of Malaysian NGOs and pressure groups, also known as the Committee for Free and Fair Elections. Earlier incarnations of the group had organised peaceful protests in 2007 and 2008. The previous elections in March 2008 had

<sup>3</sup> SHAY, Christopher. "Is Burma's Junta Trying to Join the Nuclear Club?" *Time*, 9 July 2010, [www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2002713,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2002713,00.html).

seen the ruling party, Barisan Nasional (BN), lose a share of its majority in the national parliament and control of five local assemblies. When Bersih 2.0 announced a large protest rally for 9 July, the BN-led government of Prime Minister Najib Razak launched a massive crackdown. The authorities employed the draconian Internal Security Act (ISA) and other emergency laws to arbitrarily detain dozens of activists; used extra-legal means to limit participation in the rally, including refusing necessary permits; and launched a stream of invective against Bersih in state-controlled media.

On the day of the rally, police violently dispersed some 50,000 protesters using tear gas and non-lethal force such as water cannons – evidence of which was shared over YouTube and Twitter. More than 1,600 people were arrested, thousands more injured and one protestor killed due to excessive force by police. Prime Minister Najib, previously considered a moderate reformer, was accused of behaving like an Arab despot.

Within months, however, Najib was promising major reforms, including: scrapping the ISA and the frequently abused Emergency Ordinance; loosening of media restrictions; and a review of freedom of assembly laws. While these promised reforms have so far failed to live up to their billing, the Malaysian opposition and civil society have been empowered by their ability to push the government to take their agenda seriously and respond to it. At the same time, with shades of recent events in Egypt, conservative elements of the elite have attacked the reformists as tools of “foreign powers.” Bersih will need to keep its local quality front and centre as Malaysia heads into 2013 elections that are sure to test Najib’s commitment to reform.

### **Consequences for the Region: Universality, Connectivity and Responsibility**

More broadly, democratic foment continues across the Asian region. The opposition made surprising electoral gains in Singapore, long the bastion of “successful” soft authoritarianism. Thailand continues to undergo political transformation and faces a major political crisis when the beloved King Bhumibol dies. Even North Korea could potentially see changes in the wake of Kim Jong Il’s death. There will also continue to be popular anger across Asia about issues such as rising inequality, corruption

and poor governance, as long as they remain unaddressed. The high levels of popular frustration over these issues are symptoms of a deficit of accountability, transparency, equality and opportunity in Asia much as they are in the Middle East and North Africa. As with the Arab world dictators, Asian autocrats must stop seeing dissent as the cause of disorder in society and instead recognise it for the symptom of their failure to genuinely modernise and open up political participation.

While the long-term impact of the Arab Spring in Asia remains to be seen, there have already been some repercussions and new opportunities. The demands for respect, fairness and dignity that undergirded the Arab Spring protests are consonant with values that Asian civil society and democratic activists have been pressing on the region’s governments for decades. Asian autocrats could previously brush these off as “Western” or “American” values, but their emergence at the core of popular protest movements across the Middle East and North Africa has reinforced their universality.

In addition, the emergence of democratic movements in the Middle East and North Africa has created new opportunities for dialogue with Asia’s democracies. Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan are well positioned to share their experiences of transition to democracy and provide programmatic support to struggling Arab democracies. Likewise, in Southeast Asia there are new opportunities for countries to work together across regional boundaries and share their experiences. Asia’s vibrant, well-networked civil society has yet to establish strong links to its Middle Eastern counterparts. As a Muslim-majority country that has struggled to integrate Islam, democracy and modernity – while also protecting the rights of religious minorities – Indonesia potentially could be a major player in providing practical support for democratisation in countries such as Egypt and Libya.

The potential for the events of the Arab Spring to create new linkages with Asia should not be overstated, but there is definitely an opportunity for expanded collaboration among those who want to share ideas and seek a new path towards modernity that preserves what is unique and important across diverse cultures. Asia has a growing stake in a stable, prosperous Middle East. If leaders in both regions increasingly see that stability and prosperity as emerging through the pursuit of a shared set of democratic values, this recognition could open up even greater opportunities for cooperation and progress.