

Democratisation and Reform in the Arab Countries: Dynamics of Transformation

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The Conundrum of democratisation and reform in the Arab countries has always been defined by three major elements: governance backlogs, development deficits, and a complex regional and international environment. In 2011, protests across the Arab region have demonstrated the arrival of a fourth element: the will of the Arab people. The full picture of Arab democratisation and reform will only be made known to us once we see how these elements fit together.

Overview

In the first quarter of 2011, massive waves of protest rocked the Arab region. The self-immolation of a street vendor in the Tunisian hinterland sparked a chain of protests across the region, each one detonating the next. In several Arab countries people took to the streets, voting against their leaders with their very presence, in scenes that are unprecedented in their audacity and courage, and unexpected in their magnitude and determination.

These protests and their achievements have given rise to a new sense of possibility among peoples who have long suffered political and economic exclusion. There is widespread appreciation that these protestors have indeed sparked some sort of change and have begun to choose their own future. But any prediction of the outcomes of the current revolts would be premature. The region is currently undergoing the most dynamic state of flux in its modern history. A widespread movement toward more democratic political systems is a possibility, but it may not be the only possibility. At the time of writing, two

countries have already made decisive breaks with their past and are currently heading towards a new path, although where it will lead them is unknown. Some countries have sought to preserve stability by managing aspects of change within their current systems. Others still are experiencing ongoing contestation, with some governments hardening their positions, leading to a state of polarisation and descending in some cases to a kind of civil war.

It is a challenge, then, to write about democracy and reform in the Arab countries at this moment. We are engulfed in a constant stream of news and analysis, covering remarkably diverse processes, and from a range of viewpoints. Events in a range of countries are evolving rapidly, and in different ways. Every glance at the headlines reveals a new dynamic. Each essay offers a new interpretation. In such a moment, even identifying all of the pieces of this puzzle seems an almost impossible endeavour, much less putting them together to form a clear picture. The task of this short analysis is to begin to lay out a framework within which a few of the major pieces can be placed, to describe the basic contours of these pieces, and to offer some suggestions as to how they might come together.

Our basic understanding that frames the puzzle is that any efforts toward democratic transition or consolidation in this region will have to contend with the bankrupt systems that autocrats have left behind. This has been the case in democratising episodes all over the world, and there is no reason it should not be true in the Arab countries. It may sound axiomatic, but it bears repeating amid the current mixed climate of hope, fear, and conjecture.

The pieces of the puzzle, therefore, are the major structural factors that those who are hoping for a new political system will have to contend with. One piece is the governance legacy. This is a region with no experience in democratic governance. Rather

than embracing pluralism, the Arab states have suppressed diversity since their inception. Rather than build capacity for public administration, they have developed strengths in controlling, promoting apathy and fear, and achieving their own version of stability. A second piece is the legacy of development failure, leaving a deep backlog of poverty and unemployment when prosperity is most urgently needed. The third piece is the complex international and regional climate, which presents both explicit security challenges as well as enormous pressures that are neither clearly for nor clearly against democratisation per se. These three pieces have been juxtaposed rather firmly over the last decades, but to many it seemed like a forced, unnatural fit.

The events in the region signify the emergence of a fourth piece of the puzzle: the will of the Arab people. Although this piece has actually been taking shape, unnoticed, over years, the suddenness of its emergence on the table leaves us with the impression that it has just appeared out of nowhere. Although we know it lies at the heart of the puzzle, many of us are unsure as to where or how it fits in, and what the resulting picture will be.

Piece 1: Governance, or the Nest of Opacity, Repression and Failure

The failure of governance in the Arab states is a central factor behind people's discontentment. But even in a transition to democracy, this legacy will stand as a major obstacle for their satisfaction.

People in the region have an intuitive and experience-based appreciation for the hollowness of the Arab state, for its deeply entrenched corruption, its secrecy, its viciousness and, in the end, its ineptitude. In Arabic the state is often referred to as a 'nest' of poor governance: of opacity, repression, and failure. The Arab Human Development Reports offer an illuminating tour of these shortcomings. These reports depict a state that monopolises the public space, insists on controlling everything from personal religious belief to international relations, and allows little margin for initiative beyond its own domain or without its blessing. This state, called strong by some, but more accurately fierce by others, occupies the entire country and seeks to repress any sort of change that would erode its power to command. Resistant to change or reform, this state and its vicious ways become part of the nature

of the place, suppressing the channels through which public grievances can be heard, further and further alienating a population that only sees the state as less and less legitimate with every passing day, and begins to see it as an invader of the territory it claims to protect.

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This legacy has been a long time in the making. Emerging out of the colonial schemes or arrangements, the modern Arab states were consolidated without taking into consideration the diversity of the human groups they encompassed. Their borders often appear contrived, enclosing diverse ethnic, religious and linguistic groups that did not identify with one another. The first rulers of the Arab states positioned themselves as strongmen above the divisions of their population, sometimes with colonial support or consent. After World War II, the rulers that emerged in their place carried out the same programme, now in the name of liberation from colonial rule. In the republics, these charismatic rulers have been succeeded by strongmen who share their passion for unity, but lack their vision and charisma. As the more contemporary batch of rulers have lost their ability to inspire, they have resorted to ruthless methods to remain in power.

Chief among these methods is the overinvestment in the security sector. Never subject to public oversight, this sector – the police, the internal intelligence services, in some cases the military – has been enormously instrumental to its ruler and has accounted to him alone. Heads of state, increasingly without any other recourse, have granted this apparatus an extremely wide margin for manoeuvre, all the while buttressing its powers through interference with the judiciary, dominance of the legislature, rigging elections, muzzling of the media and interference or co-optation of civil society and the private sector.

With so much attention paid to the security sector, difficult economic or political periods have seen many Arab governments increasingly neglect the whole range of other institutions that are vital for the achievement of progress and prosperity. There are states in the world that have combined authoritarianism with strong, capable institutions. None of these is in the Arab region. Instead, as governments have strengthened their mechanisms of control, they have left public services in shambles, they have neglected development planning, and in doing so, they have shredded every page of the social contracts that were presumed to be binding the Arab societies for so long. Before this state, generations of Arab people have suffered countless abuses of their security and human rights. They have been marginalised and disempowered. Very few can remember a time before emergency law. The only way people can avoid the wrath of the state is to concede that power is a given, not to be questioned or mistrusted. In addition to these consequences, the unyielding nature of the state has long prevented Arab societies from having a full discussion about various aspects of the nature of the state. Two key examples are the role of religion and the accommodation of diversity. Since their inception, Arab states have sought to maintain strategic ambiguity around the role of religion: while fully embracing the symbols of Islam, they have consistently adopted a vague stance over its position in public life. Their relationship with Islamic groups has therefore ranged from one of repression to co-option. With regard to diversity, most Arab states have not succeeded in developing mechanisms to peacefully accommodate the diversity of its population into the political system. To this day, in many Arab countries minorities are rigidly separated from the systems that govern the distribution of political power and other public systems. In some cases this is an official practice and in others it is unofficial. Governments have tried introducing quotas, most notably in Lebanon, but the system has been met with much criticism, and, more importantly, has proven insufficient to guarantee social peace and avoid civil conflict.

Piece 2: The Development Challenge, Anaemic Growth and Unemployment

The uprisings sweeping across the Arab region underscore not only people's political discontent, but also their increasing frustration in the face of the re-

gion's manifold development failures. Beneath the upheaval have been tremendous social pressures: polarisation of incomes, rising food prices, a lack of housing, and massive youth unemployment. The protests are an unequivocal indication that the underlying development crisis, which has been growing for decades, has reached an acute and explosive phase. In terms of overall economic growth, the performance of the Arab region at large has been dismal over the last forty years. Of the six world regions tracked by the United Nations Development Programme, the Arab states had the dubious distinction of registering as the only one with a negative average per capita GDP growth over the period 1970-2008, at -1.1%. This in comparison to 3.8% in South Asia and 2.7% in Sub-Saharan Africa.

A range of factors drives this dismal performance. First the utter failure of industrialisation and agricultural strategies pursued in the relatively more diversified economies between the 1950s and the 1970s. Second the overall dependence on hydrocarbon exports as the engine of growth, accounting for 74% of regional export receipts in 2008. And third, the overall deterioration of any sound development philosophy or institutions in most of the Arab states.

These are countries that, for the most part, have stood on the margins of economic globalisation, wary of allowing anything in that they cannot control. They have invested very little in research and development, or any other category that could spur innovation, are less industrialised today than they were in 1970, and welcome only a paltry percentage of the world's Foreign Direct Investment.

And all the while the population has been exploding. Since 1970 the population of the Arab region has expanded three-fold, from 128 million to 359 million in 2010. As is usually the case, this rapidly growing population is overwhelmingly youthful: today 54% of people in the region are under the age of 25.

Decades of development failures now see these youths entering adulthood facing persistent obstacles such as increased competition and high levels of unemployment in an overall context of economic stagnation. The most recent data available show a regional average youth unemployment rate of 30%. Of course, development is about much more than income and the Arab countries are to be given credit for the progress they have made in some non-income dimensions, particularly in expanding access to education. Gross school enrolment has nearly doubled over the past four decades, from 34% in

1970 to 64% today. But what leaders around the region may be learning now is that social cohesion strategies that have a mass-education component may not lead to fully positive outcomes if that education is not appropriate for the labour market, or if economies are not given enough vitality to create jobs for millions of engineers, attorneys, doctors and liberal arts graduates.

Moving to broader dimensions of development, the region faces a number of critical challenges that, consumed with regime continuity, the Arab states have failed to address. There is no more compelling example than water scarcity. Currently, of all the Arab countries, only Lebanon has access to a level of internal freshwater resources per capita that is above the international water-scarcity threshold of 1,000 m³ per person per year. The rest are under that threshold and 13 are below the even lower threshold (500 m³) of severe water scarcity. The Arab regional average in this measure is about one-tenth the world average. At its heart, this scarcity derives from the region's geographical location across one of the driest bands on Earth. But poor planning and predatory usage have exacerbated the situation, and climate change only makes the challenge more severe by increasing both average temperatures and the frequency and magnitude of drought. The net result is not only the difficulty in finding ample water resources to meet domestic needs or drive industry or agriculture, but also socio-economic impacts like unplanned urbanisation, increased exposure to food price volatility, and, potentially, resource-based conflict.

Piece 3: The Challenge of Place & External Engagement

The Arab region throughout history has been centre-stage in world politics. Lying on the largest part of the world's known oil and gas reserves, and positioned at the main sea and overland links between Asia, Africa and the Mediterranean, it is a part of the world that could hardly be left alone. This developing region has received foreign direct 'intervention' rather than foreign direct 'investments.' Of course geopolitical significance has its advantages, but it also has its drawbacks. For all the resources and special attention it may garner a country, it also draws more than its fair share of interference, not to mention invasion.

Countries undergoing transformations have at various points in history been able to enjoy, or at least have reason to think they would enjoy, clear support from one world power or another. Cold war independence struggles were able to vie for support of either the United States or the Soviet Union. Southern, Central and Eastern Europe had the powerful incentive of clear prospects to join the European Union. The demonstration effect of countries within the same cultural sphere has been important. Several democracy movements in Latin America drew at least some inspiration from the success of their peers in Spain and Portugal.

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Both for its geostrategic position as well as the state of world politics today, it is in no way clear that Arab societies striving to build their own version of democracy, would have much reason to expect to benefit from similar processes. Though democracy promotion aimed at Arab countries has indeed been a part of the policy agenda in both the United States and the European Union for decades, experience has shown that the complex dynamics of these powers tend, over time, towards a preference for stability and the status quo in the region, which has favoured the continuity of autocratic rulers. If calls for democratic reform have increased in the last two decades, for example in the *Freedom Agenda* of President George W. Bush, and in the earlier *Barcelona Process* of the European Union, the major thrust of their policy frameworks remain dominated by geostrategic concerns such as energy, international security objectives such as the 'war on terrorism', and preventing the flow of migrants from Arab countries to European countries north of the Mediterranean, and regional security goals such as the security of Israel and the containment of Iran. There can be no reasonable expectation that these geostrategic priorities will change anytime soon; Arab governments

and civil societies could be forgiven for wondering whether and to what extent they can expect to find consistent support for democratisation within this context.

If the broad geopolitical context is fraught with risk, the closer regional context can be even tenser. There is no question that any democratising government in the Arab region would feel pressure to take a harder line in its approach to any number of conflicts and tensions that could originate around the complex Israeli-Palestinian situation. The polarisation regarding the relationship with Iran and its nuclear project, as well as security in the Arab/Persian Gulf region will have an impact on the courses to be taken by the new emerging political systems.

Piece 4: The Arab People, the Search for Freedoms and Rights

The fourth piece of the puzzle is the newest: the Arab people.

The Arab people have been estranged from the state for decades. Many have been pauperised in a system of oppressing poverty and suffered deeply entrenched discrimination. Confronted with this situation, the Arab people have shown a variety of coping mechanisms. Many have proceeded through their day-to-day lives quietly, taking distance from the state and retreating into personal life. Others have sought association within families, tribes, sects, and other identity markers that can provide shelter from repression and recession alike.

Many Arabs have vindicated their rights, over and over, in their daily lives, changing the social fabric through ordinary deeds. Families investing in their children's education, migrants moving from rural to urban spaces or seeking better opportunities in other countries, and some people have created their livelihood in the sphere of the informal economy. These everyday actions have accumulated to generate tremendous changes in social norms over the years.

And there have been protests, too. Over the past decade, the Arab region has seen a marked increase in social protests as well as strikes and demonstrations. Some of these protests have been political and others have been more socio-economic in nature, like the food riots in several countries over 2007 and 2008.

However the protests that broke out in Sidi Bouzid on 14 December 2010 and spread across Tunisia

and the region were qualitatively different from any that came before. They were not political or strictly socio-economic. They were an all-encompassing demand for a thorough break with the status quo, an essential call for the restoration of dignity and the reclaiming of people's rights.

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One of the most powerful symbols of the protests has been the figure of Mohammed Bouazizi, whose tragic and spontaneous protest has been seen as an emblem of young Arabs' desperation, lack of choices and, in a way, their essential peacefulness. Another powerful symbol has been Khaled Said, whose murder by police in Egypt helped galvanise the monumental protests there. Both embody the dilemma of the Arab youth, the narrow space and limited or negligible choices allowed politically and economically.

The most common refrain of protesters has been that their leaders step down. In some countries, this was an immediate request. In others it came only after protesters were driven to a more hardened position by government responses to their protests that were either unconvincing, violent or both.

But the protest movements in the region leave many questions unanswered. One of the most striking characteristics of these protests is their spontaneity and their lack of organisation. Most of the people involved have had no political affiliation, and the different types of formal and informal groups that have been involved – youth organisations, bloggers, political parties, and Islamist movements – have vastly different constituencies, priorities and methods for seeking to achieve influence.

Accordingly, it remains unclear what exactly these protest movements might stand for, and how they might try to achieve their objectives. It is understood that their supporters want a say in the decisions that affect their lives. It is clear that they want more freedom to be themselves. There is no doubt that they want more economic opportunities.

But what else do they stand for? What are their expectations for a democratising state? What role do they hope to play, and how will they get there? How do they intend to organise? And what about the people who did not join the protest? What are their positions on the major questions facing the Arab state today?

It is difficult to tell. Civil society has been so repressed for so many years, that crucial opportunities for people to test and aggregate their ideas about civic affairs have been missing from the scene.

Far and away the best organised of all actors involved in protests in some countries have been the mainstream Islamic groups. And if political space opens up, it is likely that these groups will change their strategies. It is to be expected that mainstream Islamist groups will seek to move from the opposition into coalition or unity governments.

Over the last few decades, a notable trend in many Arab countries is the expansion of the agenda of Islamic parties to call for a democratic state that, while making reference to Islamic law, shows respect for core democratic principles such as alternation of power, popular sovereignty and judicial independence. Whether this trend continues and how the future political system manages to accommodate these actors will surely be one of the most important aspects of any transition toward democracy in the region.

But this will still leave any country moving toward a new system with an urgent need to search for a new development model. No obvious options jump to the fore. The region has already tried a few models, and none have succeeded. Moreover, the international community offers very little in the way of positive examples at the moment.

Conclusion

Democratic transitions have always been a complex process. While definitions differ, there have been over one hundred episodes of democratisation since the beginning of the Third Wave. The reason the number is so high is because so many countries have needed multiple episodes before consolidating. Transition is a long process, it is not linear and is fraught with challenges. Putting former rulers and their cronies on trial, abolishing ruling political par-

ties, and confiscating their funds, will not change the harsh economic conditions or alleviate sufferings. Unless democratic change is succeeded very quickly by tangible economic improvement for the poor segments of the society, the fall of the tyrants will not meet the expectations of the majority of the people. It is well known that elections can be quickly organised, but development needs time.

Young democracies are challenged most when they have weak institutions. Young democracies are challenged most when they have difficult economic prospects. And young democracies are challenged most when they live in tough neighbourhoods. These pieces have long been part of the puzzle of Arab democracy and reform. Now there is a fourth in the form of the empowered Arab people. We will only know the whole picture of democratisation and reform in the Arab countries once we see how these four pieces come together.

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At present, it seems that the countries in the region are heading toward a number of different scenarios. Tunisia and Egypt have moved toward a scenario in which the people are charting their own course. They have overcome autocratic regimes and now will have to undertake the difficult task of true democratisation and reform. Other countries such as Morocco and Jordan are struggling to manage reform within their existing systems. Still others such as Syria remain in a deadlock, with governments seeking to crush the will of protesters. If these governments succeed, the question of reform will be off the agenda in these countries for some time, which unfortunately is already the case in Libya, where the most significant moves to be made in the near term are not by reformers at all, but rather by the international community.