

Applying the Lessons of the Arab Spring to Today's Protest Movements: A Call for Political Reform

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Brief Analysis

Unlike the protests that took place in Morocco, Jordan, and in southern Iraq in the last year, which were driven primarily by specific policy concerns and have subsequently subsided, both Sudan and Algeria are currently witnessing remarkably widespread protests motivated by uncompromising political demands for regime change. Both last year's protests and the current movements emphasize that—despite the differences between cases in terms of motives, the differing governmental structures and the domestic dynamics in each country—there is more appetite for political change than many analysts suggest.

These analysts have argued that the possibility of another Arab Spring is unlikely due to a discouraging global context that prioritizes security over the promotion of democracy. However, whether or not complete political upheaval is on the horizon for any one Arab country, it is important not to repeat the shortcomings of Middle East watchers' expectations prior to 2011. During that time, dozens of arguments about the region applied conventional explanations to the behavior of the Arab region's citizens. Exceptionalism, poverty, illiteracy, religion, culture, and geographic remoteness from Western democracies were all proffered as answers for why the Arab people were not enacting the type of revolts visible in Latin America and Eastern Europe. These explanations contributed to these analysts being blindsided when, in fact, revolution did occur.

Thus, even excluding any discussion of another Arab Spring, what is happening now in both Sudan and Algeria—which may spread to other countries—should be taken as a chance to draw attention to the possibility of new wave of political unrest in a volatile region. Considering the ongoing regional crises, which range from terrorism to civil conflicts, proxy wars, a stagnant Palestinian-Israeli peace process, and the Gulf crisis, it is plausible that any additional source of tension could exacerbate these extant issues and spark a more overt political unrest.

That is why experts—and policymakers—should return to the question of political reform in the Middle East. Promoting political reform within extant governmental structures has a strong rationale today. Indeed, it has become a necessity.

One may argue that the Arab citizens themselves now value security and stability over democracy. Indeed, this is a

common narrative of Arab autocracies, but it lacks solid, credible evidence. Considering that neither credible surveys nor free elections are allowed in the majority of the Arab countries, this argument is misleading, assuming that the interests of the leadership match—by necessity—the interests of their peoples. In reality, Arab communities are like any other community in today's world, with preferences varying between conservatives and liberals. However, keeping substantial peaceful and liberal voices from being represented or even heard may have destabilizing consequences. Both Algeria and Sudan today are warning signs for how exclusion and delay of political reforms can easily bring sudden, unforeseen crises under autocracies.

Other voices may argue that international pressure for political reforms has actually had a negative impact on the region, suggesting that the growing security threats have resulted from external pressures on Arab regimes to adopt political reforms after the 9/11 tragedy. These pressures are linked to the 2010/2011 uprisings and their consequences, and are thus cast in a negative light. According to the same argument, promoting political reform once again could lead to the repetition of the 2010/2011 scenario, including its instability and return of nondemocratic leadership. However, there is also a third option for the international community, one that neither involves supporting a second Arab Spring nor sustaining the status quo.

In other words, the current political unrest emphasizes the urgent need for a set of political reforms initiated by the Arab ruling elites themselves who can be encouraged through political incentives from the international community. The incentives model that is already applied to countering terrorism and economic liberalization should be extended to include political reforms in parallel to these other efforts. Indeed, supporting only one track of reforms can lead to a backlash, as no single track can work alone, nor can it compensate for the rest. Economic liberalization requires the political freedom to allow the freedom of association and representation of people's social and economic interests. Similarly, countering terrorism requires mentorship from civil society to ensure that these efforts are proportional and not directed at innocents and political opponents.

Take Saudi Arabia: the crown prince Muhammad bin Salman has adopted a plan for economic liberalization and easing the religious restrictions on his society. When the West expressed optimism for this plan without a parallel call for political reform, the crown prince interpreted this support as a blank check for the entirety of his domestic and regional policies. Thus, the West was seen as accepting MbS's policies of detaining his foes from the royal family and influential Saudi businessmen, sustaining his costly war in Yemen with its devastating humanitarian consequences and its growing domestic financial burden, targeting human rights defenders, and ultimately the assassination of the Saudi Journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Lately, it seems that the West has now come to the conclusion that the crown prince's doctrine is, domestically and regionally, a destabilizing rather than a modernizing plan, but the West should also understand its own perceived role as implicitly sanctioning all of Saudi Arabia's actions.

Thus, Arab leadership should be encouraged to enact political reforms in order to avoid serious political uprisings, pushing toward a respect of human rights, political participation of civil opponents, liberating the civil society and enhancing freedom of expression, judiciary independence, and gender equality. In addition, the establishment of a safe trajectory for power transfers is of equal significance, even if this transfer occurs between the elites of the same regimes themselves. The idea is that laying the foundations of peaceful power transfers are the necessary first steps forward to avoid the potentially devastating consequences of the status quo.

Adopting these types of reforms may do much to ameliorate and soothe the concealed, but building anger in several Arab societies, which has resulted from both political repression and economic obstacles. They can provide a chance for Arab citizens to breathe, provide a space for people to vent their dissatisfaction, and ultimately inoculate Arab societies from possible explosions.

Indeed, we must recognize that the current situation in Arab countries is unbearable for many Arab citizens. As the ruling regimes keep exerting pressures over their people, supported by a Western tolerance, anger is accumulating.

In the case of Egypt, the ruling regime that has adopted harsh austerity measures is amending the Egyptian constitution to enable the president to theoretically remain in power until 2032 without restrictions. In Algeria, President Abdul-Aziz Bouteflika, who has ruled his country for over three decades, attempted to run for a fifth term without being able to practice his simplest daily routine. Likewise in Sudan, Omar Al-Bashir—a dictator wanted by the International Criminal Court for war crimes—still aspires keep his position after more than three decades in power and months of public outcry. Even in Jordan and Morocco, whose leadership showed some openness to reform between 2011 and 2013, the administrations' reformist attitudes are receding, encouraged by the West's decision to turn a blind eye to the growing authoritarian attitude in the region.

Ultimately, if we can learn something from the lesson of the Arab Spring and its consequences, it should be that calls for radical change come when people perceive them as the only available tool to change their miserable status quo. In today's Middle East, where the doors to peaceful change have largely been closed by Arab rulers, there is a fire under the ashes. Urgent action is needed, otherwise the region may again go up in flames. ❖

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