

Arab Spring or Islamist Winter?

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Articles & Testimony

The Arab uprisings—the intifadas against tyranny—were and are a remarkable accomplishment for the peoples of the Middle East. But they were only the end of the beginning.

In October 2011—ten months after the demonstrations that ended Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak’s thirty-year tenure in office—a Cairo court upheld a 2005 conviction disqualifying Ayman Nour from participating in the state’s first post-revolt presidential elections. Nour, who in 2005 had the temerity to challenge Mubarak for the office, paid for his insolence by spending the next four years in jail doing hard labor. Clearly disappointed, Nour lamented upon hearing the verdict, “I thought that there was a revolution that had happened in Egypt.”

A year after the revolt in Tunisia hailed the onset of the so-called “Arab Spring,” Nour is not alone in his frustration. From Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, where tyrants were toppled, to Syria and Bahrain, where uprisings against dictators persist, the trajectory of change in the Middle East remains uncertain. Throughout the region, anti-democratic forces—Islamists, former regime elements, militaries, and external forces—conspire to subvert positive developments. Meanwhile, challenged with insurrection, the dictators still standing have tried to forestall a thaw in their own countries by any means necessary.

There are some potential bright spots. Bolstered by substantial pledges from the Gulf Cooperation Council and a new government led by a jurist from the International Criminal Court, Jordan is currently pursuing unprecedented meaningful political reform that’s moving the kingdom, albeit slowly, toward more representative government. But aside from this, in the near term at least, prospects for the proliferation of liberal democracy in the Arab world do not look particularly promising.

Not surprisingly, disillusionment is starting to take hold throughout the region among “liberals,” a term increasingly hard to define. In Washington, too, the initial excitement over the unprecedented display of people power in the Middle East has faded, replaced by growing talk of “Arab Winter” and a fear that a shift in momentum will help

illiberal forces and hurt US interests.

In Bahrain, the minority Sunni-led kingdom's initial brutal repression of the majority Shiite (and, according to the king, Iranian-inspired and -assisted) protesters, culminated in March 2011 with the destruction of the iconic three-hundred-foot monument in Manama's Pearl Roundabout. While the circle has been paved over and renamed, the opposition continues to call for representative government and a constitutional monarchy. The crackdown, and the Sunni government's repeated accusations of meddling by the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, among others, has accentuated the already extant sectarian divide on the island and in the Gulf in general. Should the findings of the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry—which documented the extensive human rights abuses and recommended that officials be held accountable—be ignored by King Hamad al-Khalifa, it will only fuel the discontent. Today, tensions and violence persist as the tiny island hurtles toward another seemingly inevitable showdown. Regardless of whether the largely Shiite opposition prevails and irrespective of its preferred flavor of government, Tehran would view any transition as a strategic opportunity.

Meanwhile, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, in his effort to avoid the fate of Egypt's Mubarak and Tunisia's Ben Ali, has overseen the killing of more than five thousand extremely tenacious pro-democracy protesters. Even as the violence spikes, it's difficult to imagine the regime surviving the crisis, and the state could slide toward civil war as the demonstrators, increasingly under pressure, begin a transition from peaceful protest to armed insurrection. Although only about nine percent of the opposition National Council's 230-member government-in-exile General Assembly seats have been set aside for Islamists, the fact that this level of representation is equivalent to that of the liberal democratic "Damascus Declaration" organization is cause for concern. Given the escalating violence, it is tempting to say that whatever comes after Assad will likely be better; but given the brutalization of the Syrian people, this may be a fallacy, and in any case it's far from assured that whatever comes next will be democratic. In the meantime, Assad has threatened to "burn the whole region" should NATO or the UN pursue military action against his regime.

The political trajectory in Libya—which engaged in a nine-month NATO-assisted war of liberation from Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi—is also unclear. The initial public face of the National Transitional Council, the Benghazi government led by a University of Pittsburgh Ph.D. and a former Minister of Justice who resigned to protest Qaddafi's human rights abuses, was reassuring. More recently, though, the gruesome summary execution of Qaddafi, and the NTC's failure to investigate this and other high-profile killings, has raised questions about the commitment of the new Libya to human rights. Equally alarming to some have been Islamist rumblings coming from the NTC and the former Justice Minister's October statement that the Qaddafi-era proscription against polygamy was "contrary to Sharia [Islamic law] and must be stopped."

With a population of six million, a functioning interim government, and potential annual oil revenues in excess of \$40 billion, post-Qaddafi Libya should have been able to emerge from the fighting in good shape. But the nation is awash in arms. Militias have refused to lay down their weapons and have begun tribal clashes with rivals, terrorizing civilians and engaging in a reign of reprisal against supporters of the former regime. Further complicating matters, one of the militias that has balked at disarming is the Tripoli Military Council, led by Ahmed Bilhaj, the former emir of the Libyan Islamic Fighting Group, an al-Qaeda affiliate. At the same time, the TMC as well as other prominent militias, including reportedly the Zintanis, are receiving support from various Gulf states, perpetuating rivalries. With one hundred and forty tribes, more than three hundred extremely well-armed militias, and weak central authority, the challenges facing the new Libyan government are legion.

Putting aside concerns that some of the regime's remaining stocks of chemical weapons, which went unsecured for a time, may now be missing, it's already been confirmed that more than twenty thousand man-portable air-defense systems (MANPADS) have vanished. Reports suggest that these missiles—which are capable of downing both military

and civilian aircraft—as well as other heavy weapons, have found their way to Chad, Niger, Mali, Egypt, and Gaza.

Even in Tunisia, long considered among the best-educated and most liberal and Western-oriented of Arab states, the fate of liberal democracy is unclear. During its first post-Ben Ali elections this October, Ennahda, the Islamist “Renaissance” Party, won more than forty percent of Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly seats. While the internationally monitored elections were judged free and fair, and the Islamist party’s leader Rachid al-Ghannouchi has vowed to establish a pluralist state and enter into a coalition with secular parties, and has articulated his opposition to “the imposition of the head scarf in the name of Islam,” earlier and less expedient statements made by Ghannouchi during his twenty-two years in exile reveal a more militant agenda. In 1990, for example, he demanded that Muslims “wage unceasing war against the Americans until they leave the land of Islam, or we will burn and destroy all their interests across the entire Islamic world.” More recently, in May 2011 Ghannouchi referred to Israel as a “germ” and predicted the state’s annihilation by 2027.

At the same time, there are already indications that Ghannouchi and Ennahda are not as democratic as suggested. In October 2011—in a stunning example of the type of liberties that are at risk in Tunisia—Ghannouchi defended protesters who ransacked a local television station that aired *Persepolis*, a film critical of the Iranian revolution. These days, Ghannouchi says he’d like Ennahda to follow the model of Turkey’s Islamist Justice and Development or AK Party. While the AK typically passes in the West for “moderate,” secularist Turkish advocates of liberal democracy who are watching the erosion of basic rights such as freedom of the press do not any longer consider their state a “model.” In any event, it’s not at all clear that Ennahda’s constituents are as “enlightened” as the organization’s leader, or that the party won’t be outflanked by Tunisia’s growing, indigenous, militant Salafist movement.

While politics in Tunisia, Libya, Bahrain, and Syria are important, what transpires in Egypt with its eighty-three million people will largely determine where the extraordinary events of 2011 lead in the region. The toppling of the thirty-year president, Hosni Mubarak, dramatically raised expectations among the population. Egyptians anticipated not only better governance, but an improvement to their financial situations. One year after the revolt, however, little if any progress has been made on either front.

Indeed, in terms of economy, there has been a marked deterioration of conditions since February 2011. Frequent, large-scale demonstrations and a generally poor security situation have scared away tourism and foreign direct investment, two key sectors of the economy. Not only are incomes down, so is growth, which is contributing to a rise in unemployment. The numbers tell the story: even if Egypt is fortunate enough to reach zero percent growth in FY2011, an additional 750,000 (mostly youths) will be added to the state’s already considerable ranks of the jobless. Making matters worse, with all the uncertainty surrounding Egyptian politics, it’s unclear when either sector will rebound. These internal developments are having a real impact on the state’s macroeconomic well-being: since the uprising, Egypt’s foreign reserves have plummeted from \$36 billion to an estimated \$20 billion and are being disbursed at a rate of \$2 billion a month.

The political trends in Cairo likewise provide little reason for optimism. While the freedom of expression immediately after Mubarak’s fall was unprecedented, this brief springtime was soon replaced by stormier weather. In the fall of 2011, reports proliferated of arrests and detentions of Egyptians for violations of speech prohibitions. In October alone, one blogger was arrested and sentenced in a civil court to three years for “contempt of religion” for articulating an unfavorable view of Islam, and both activists and bloggers were incarcerated and put before a military court on charges of “insulting the army.” The latter of these crimes—brought by the ruling Supreme Military Council (SMC)—consisted of civilians complaining about the nondemocratic nature of the Army.

Throughout Egypt, polling suggests that the military remains popular and respected for its role during the revolt. Among the so-called “liberals,” however, the institution has lost its luster. The SMC’s heavy-handedness, faintly

sinister opacity, and peremptory decisions on a host of issues, from the new constitution to the timing of the elections, have proved quite unpopular, particularly among Egypt's non-Islamists. Given the creeping authoritarianism, one US-based analyst recently asked whether cynics might be wondering whether the revolt was “merely replacement of an eighty-two-year-old Air Force general”—Mubarak—“with a seventy-six-year-old Army general”—Minister of Defense Mohamed Tantawi.

Islamists aren't particularly pleased with the SMC, either. Indeed, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is deeply opposed to the military's efforts to enshrine supra-constitutional principles ensuring the “civil state” and preventing the legislature from passing laws affecting the armed forces without the military's consent. The Islamists likewise reject the SMC's attempt to insinuate itself into the constitution-drafting process. Should the SMC's gambit succeed, it would prevent the Islamists—who are likely to control the parliament—from selecting the committee that writes Egypt's new constitution. It would also institutionalize a military role in Egyptian politics going forward.

The military's attempt to change the rules so late in the game prompted a significant popular backlash in November 2011 that continues to today, resulting in Tahrir Square demonstrations reminiscent of the February revolt that toppled Mubarak. With dozens killed and hundreds wounded, it was unclear, just days before the start of the elections, whether they would proceed. In the midst of this violence, the Egyptian daily *Youm Saba* ran the headline “Egypt returns to point zero.”

If and when the SMC actually return to the barracks, it's not going to be the “liberals” who set the tone. While it's possible that Egypt will retain a presidential system of government, the Islamists will control the parliament. In fact, taking a cue from Ennahda's electoral victory in late October, the MB announced that its Freedom and Justice party would increase the number of candidates standing for the People's Assembly from forty-nine percent, or two hundred and forty-four, to four hundred of the lower house's four hundred and ninety-eight elected seats. Together, Freedom and Justice and the more hard-line and increasingly popular Salafist party al-Nour will control a decisive majority in the new parliament.

Given the changed political culture of post-Mubarak Egypt, an Islamist landslide could have a significant impact. Putting aside the potentially serious implications for the peace with Israel and Egyptian-US relations, the MB's policy that sharia, or Islamic law, will “represent the governing principle in defining priorities of objectives, and policies, and strategies” cannot help but affect domestic governance. Consider, for example, that Hazim Abu Ismail—a leading Islamist who is floating a run for the presidency—advocates the re-imposition of the *jizya*, a special tax on all non-Muslim men of military age. While there's no need to panic that Egypt will soon join Iran as an Islamic Republic, over time (but beginning immediately), an Islamist parliament could chip away at the largely secular legal framework.

Indeed, notwithstanding the Muslim Brotherhood's irritation with Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's September 2011 suggestion that Egypt should adopt the Turkish system of government and ensure the secular nature of the state in its constitution, it appears that the MB is indeed pursuing the Turkish model. Not the old, pre-Erdogan paradigm, wherein the military served as the guardian of secularism in the state, but a new model, in which an Islamist party (i.e., the AKP) secures a majority in Parliament and then gradually leverages its legislative authority to divest the military of its traditional power and target secular political opponents.

Few who have traveled to the Middle East since the uprisings began would dispute the vastly changed atmosphere there, especially the increased freedom of speech and the animation of political discussion. Regardless of how one views the future of the ongoing uprisings, ending authoritarian regimes is a positive development for the peoples of the region. But that assessment could change should secular dictators be replaced with theocratic dictators.

In light of the trends, it seems almost inevitable that much of the political space in the region will soon be dominated

by the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafists, who will, as always, focus on dawa, or Islamic propagation. By controlling the education and social affairs–related ministries, the Islamists will have even more of a leg up on radically transforming society in their direction. It will be difficult in this environment for “liberal” or secular parties to survive, much less thrive.

Instead of liberal democracy in the region, populist and Islamist politics will likely fill the gap left by the authoritarians. Of course, should the Islamists take power and fail to govern well, eradicate endemic corruption, create jobs, and improve the economy, they too can be voted out of power. That is, provided that these states continue to hold elections and viable alternatives are not snuffed out. The challenge for Washington in the coming years, then, will be to maintain relations with Islamist states, while simultaneously helping to preserve and strengthen ostensibly liberal parties.

Accomplishing these goals will not be easy. Some of the emerging governments in the region—Islamist or otherwise—may be overtly hostile toward the US. It’s also conceivable that a democratically elected Arab government or two will be committed to the destruction of the state of Israel, a policy that would complicate productive US bilateral relationships with these states. And supporting the non-Islamist opposition in these states—via the provision of US technical assistance, for example—would almost certainly be viewed by the Islamists as interference in domestic affairs.

The Arab uprisings—the intifadas against tyranny—were and are a remarkable accomplishment for the peoples of the Middle East. But they were only the end of the beginning. During a speech given in Washington in early October, Abdel Monem Said Aly—a Mubarak appointee who served until the revolt as head of Egypt’s government-funded Al Ahram Center—opined that he didn’t like the term “Arab Spring.” In the Middle East, he explained, “We go from winter to summer and in between there are only sandstorms.” Abdel Monem’s reference suggests the turbulence and uncertainty of the period ahead. But based on the current trajectory, an even better metaphor might be February 2nd, Groundhog Day, when we find ourselves waiting to see just how much longer winter will last.

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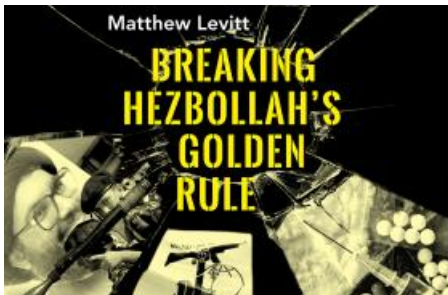
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