

## Conclusion

### The promises and challenges of the Arab Revolutions

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The Arab Revolutions have caused a lot of excitement about the prospects of change for the better in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).<sup>1</sup> These momentous events have been praised as a bottom-up movement for democracy and political accountability. Some analysts have even compared them with the anti-colonial movement that kicked European empires out of the region. For this and many other reasons, these events have been represented as a second chance for the Arab world to build an authentic and democratic system of government.<sup>2</sup> Both in the region and outside of it many are branding this political breakthrough as a form of ‘second independence’—a popular uprising demanding freedom, not from the colonial West, but from the despotic and illegitimate ruling classes supported and in some cases imposed by the West. To this extent, the Arab Revolutions represent a significant historical development for the MENA as the Revolutions promise to usher the region into the twenty-first century, not via dictatorship but via democracy—something which many people thought would never occur.<sup>3</sup>

Many important questions remain unanswered, however, including: How are authenticity and democracy defined in the

MENA? What might authentic political accountability and democracy look like in the Middle East? What role should Islam play in the emerging system? What about minority rights? How will Christian Arabs and other ethno-religious communities of the MENA fit into the picture? What status will women have in the post-revolution Arab world? Having sacrificed so much to shake the foundations of the authoritarian regimes and winning international sympathy and praise, the challenge for the revolutionary forces is to maintain the momentum for change and guard against falling back into old habits.

These questions and problems are the key themes highlighted by the various chapters in this volume, each of which has provided theoretical insight and empirical snapshots as to the real challenges facing the various revolutions taking place in different ways across the Arab region. And while it is neither feasible nor desirable to generalise about the different developments as they unfold in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and even the quiet political reforms being undertaken in Morocco and Jordan, some common themes have emerged that cannot go unnoticed. First and foremost is the deep realisation among the masses—the so-called Arab street—and even among the ruling classes and intellectual elite, that the existing political systems have reached a crisis point, losing their legitimacy to the point of no return. This argument has been made by academics even before the Arab Spring started in Tunisia.<sup>4</sup> The toppling of regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya is proof, if any is still needed, that the search for Arab democracy has begun in earnest and continues with unstoppable momentum. Superficial reforms will no longer be accepted as sufficient, nor will they satisfy the demands of today's educated and media-savvy Arab youth. The fact that the old regimes have reached their use-by-date is no surprise to most observers and analysts. Their successive failures to democratise, develop their local economies, reform their education systems or bridge the gap with the developed world has engendered a deep social and political malaise among the masses.

A second theme developed in this book and one that seems to cut across the various Arab Revolutions is the absence of any ideological ownership of this popular uprising. Refreshingly, the various uprisings lack a clear political or intellectual leadership that could position itself to reap the rewards of the revolution to the exclusion

of all other political players. And this is why the Arab Revolutions have had such a spectacular impact on the region and the world at large. Their unpredictable nature has not only caught the old guard by surprise but also ensured that even opposition parties have had to pay special attention to the real hunger for genuine reform that transcends the political sphere to touch the social, ethical, educational and cultural domains. For this reason the Arab Revolutions are changing not only the politics of the region but also its culture in a manner that cannot be captured by the mere organising of free and fair elections. This is where the actions, reactions and interactions of the world and, in particular, of the West are so important, as these will help to determine and shape the contours of future relationships between them and the nascent Arab democracies.

Perhaps the most significant common feature uniting the different revolutions across the Arab region is the predominance of youth and women in kick-starting the various movements. Two individuals who epitomise these two demographic groups are the young Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire and ignited the Arab Spring on 17 December 2011, and the veiled Yemeni political activist, Tawakkul Karman, whose determination and clarity of purpose won her the 2011 Nobel Peace prize. Perhaps this is unsurprising given that the two demographic segments of the Arab populace they represent have been the most disadvantaged, marginalised and excluded from the decision-making process. But in the context of the Arab world with its ideological baggage and related legacies of a largely patriarchal society, it is no easy task for youth and women to demand a prominent, let alone a leading role in shaping political and social affairs in these countries; this is where the challenge of the post-revolution phase resides.

Relevant to these common features of the Arab Revolutions is the much debated role of political Islam in the region and the growing assertiveness of Islamist forces.<sup>5</sup> In Egypt, for example, some observers were surprised that the Muslim Brotherhood was not at the forefront of the popular revolt against Hosni Mubarak. Rather it appeared to have been dragged into the Arab Revolutions by the sheer energy of the grass-root movements. Since then, however, the Brotherhood appears to have recognised the opportunity that this popular movement presents. It is now involved in a systematic effort

to form coalitions and set the political agenda for the future course of Egypt. Despite warnings from familiar quarters in particular secular and leftist Arab political parties and their Western sponsors, this is not cause for concern in itself. The Muslim Brotherhood has long been part of the political landscape of the country and even when banned was never inactive. Egyptians recognise the Brotherhood as a viable and credible political force, though one that has never had the opportunity to make itself accountable to the people. With the opening up of the political system, it is now appropriate for the Brotherhood to present its alternative socio-economic program to the Egyptian electorate. The Brotherhood's involvement in the electoral process is part of the ongoing transition process that can help consolidate the emerging foundations of democracy. Learning to persuade the electorate and respect its decisions—even if they are not the party's desired outcome—is a lesson that can only be learned while engaged with the emerging political system. The recent parliamentary elections in Egypt have produced an outcome that clearly favors the Islamists of not only the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party (FJP; who won more than 40 per cent of the vote), but also the ultra-conservative Salafi party, al-Nour, which surprisingly won more than 20 per cent of the popular vote to run a clear second to the FJP.

With the Islamists parties' decided victory in Egypt, the challenge will be to prevent old habits and traditions from resurfacing in times of crisis. One worrying aspect is the status of women. There is a danger that gender equality and measures put in place by the deposed regimes to encourage women's participation in politics may be seen as vestiges of the past. Administrative and political measures to advance equality and women's rights, such as the quota system in the Egyptian parliament, may be seen by some as Western-imposed models. The search for cultural authenticity risks jeopardising gains that have a more pragmatic value. The desire to reject Mubarak's regime and his close alliance with the West runs the risk of undermining fundamental advances that Egypt has made in protecting women's and minority rights. This challenge is shared by other states.

In Tunisia, the Ennahda party experienced an impressive electoral victory at the 23 October 2011 elections for the constituent assembly. As the clear winner of the first free elections, it gained 43

per cent of the popular vote and eighty-nine of the 217 seat assembly. The moderate Islamist party promised to work with other political players and form a coalition government to preserve the spirit of unity and common purpose that drove the Tunisian popular uprising. Although critics are already warning of the dire consequences of this electoral victory, there is little evidence to suggest that Ennahda is pursuing a policy of imposed Islamisation. The warning that Islamists subscribe to the mantra of entering the political process only to gain and monopolise political power is a much repeated charge. To date, the Tunisian and Egyptian cases have not substantiated this claim. Indeed, in the Tunisian case, the Ennahda party has formed a coalition government with two centre-left parties: the Congress for the Republic and the Takattul for Labour and Liberties, and has included many independent ministers in the first freely elected government of the post-revolution Arab world. And, despite the real challenge of avoiding polarisation between the two main camps, the Islamists and the secularists, there are positive signs that those who brought down the dictatorships of the old Arab world are also capable of negotiating, albeit with difficulty, the building of a representative deliberative form of political governance. That this form of governance does not or will not look like established Western models is not the issue. In fact, it may be desirable that the emergent systems do not attempt to mimic Western models which do not and cannot reflect the local specificities of the region with its rich history and diverse cultures.

It is always easier to destroy something than to build something anew. Bringing down the old regimes in the Arab world took blood and sacrifice, but it was a much more clear-cut process than building a new, authentic and democratic MENA. Inevitably there will be mistakes and misjudgements. But there is immense energy and good will at the grassroots to make the transition a success. The contours of the new system may be contested, but that is part of the learning process. The Arab world needs the encouragement and support of the international community on its path to democracy, not condescending lectures and ready-made solutions.<sup>6</sup>

If the Arab Revolutions have any lasting image it will be of the spontaneous gatherings in Tahrir Square in Cairo, the Qasba in Tunis and similar public gathering spaces in Manama, Aleppo, Benghazi

and elsewhere. The overwhelming message from the gathering youth was that it was time to break with the corrupt old ways of governing and embark instead on a cleansing reform of political, educational, judicial, cultural and media institutions. Theirs was a united cry for authenticity and democracy at a time when the old guard had lost all forms of credibility. And while it is always easy to retrospectively assign values and to comment on significant historical events, the Arab Revolutions will still require more multi-faceted dissections, deeper historical analyses and refined qualitative explorations than are possible in this volume given its temporal proximity to these momentous events. Indeed, this book is a first step towards uncovering the nuances and longer term implications of these mass popular movements and towards developing an understanding of the myriad ways that the Arab Revolutions not only tore apart the mantle of MENA authoritarianism but also shattered much of the conventional wisdom regarding politics in the region. The events could not have been predicted by any standard measure of democratic change, and the Arab street has demanded that a new conceptual framework be developed that is sensitive to the region's cultural, historical and political norms. And amid all of this, the so-called 'Arab exceptionalism' in certain Western academic circles or the inability of Arab states to democratise<sup>7</sup> has been refuted once and for all as the region embraces political change with an unprecedented enthusiasm and pace.

As the chapters in this volume also reveal, the magnitude of the challenges ahead cannot be understated given the possibility that a prolonged period of economic stagnation and political instability will follow the Arab Revolutions. How well the region will cope with these challenges will depend on many internal variables, most notably the features and nature of the transition period, the level of confidence among local and foreign investors, and the competence and capacities of the emerging ruling elites. But the role of international agencies such as the UN, the IMF and the World Bank will also be crucial in this transitional period. Ultimately, the human cost, the economic price and the sacrifices made in the pursuit of the Arab Revolutions will be well worth it if, and only if, real positive change is achieved. And the litmus test of this change will once again be the Arab masses: if they permit the centralisation of power around

outdated models of governance, if they exclude women and minorities, if they resort to violence and re-ignite old hatreds, and if they prioritise simplistic and fundamentalist ideologies over diversity and difference, then the high price of the Arab Revolutions will have been paid in vain. If, however, they are patient and participate, engage and invest in this period of change to make their own authentic and democratic future, then there is real hope for the region. It is up to the people of the MENA to decide whether the spark ignited in the many 'Tahrir' squares is snuffed out or burns brightly.

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## Notes

- 1 Youngs, 'The EU and the Arab Spring'; Mansouri, 'Hope Yet for the Middle East'; Isakhan, 'The Middle East Should Not Adopt Western Democracy'.
- 2 Mansouri, 'In People Power, There Is Hope Yet For the Middle East'; Moalla, 'De L'indépendance a la Revolution'.
- 3 Saikal, 'Authoritarianism, Revolution and Democracy'.
- 4 Ibrahim and Lawson, *Political Parties and Democracy*.
- 5 Bradley, *After the Arab Spring*.
- 6 Isakhan, 'Australia's Mideast Relationship is Easy as 1,2,3'.
- 7 Ibrahim, 'Introduction to Political Parties and Democracy'.