Political Transformations in Arab Countries: The Different Evolutions

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In early 2011, a wave of unrest swept through Arab countries, in a chain of events referred to as the Arab Spring. As a result of these events, the regimes in Tunisia and Egypt were overthrown in a matter of weeks with minimal violence. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi, the tyrant who had dominated the country for decades, lost his position and his life in a war waged by Libyan rebels, with the blessing of the United Nations Security Council and the support of NATO and the Arab League. Not all the uprisings led to regime change. In some, the outcome was ambiguous. The President of Yemen was forced out of office but not entirely out of power in a negotiated solution through the efforts of neighbouring countries. The King of Morocco nipped unrest in the bud by issuing a new Constitution that gave a somewhat greater role to Parliament and government, but without altering the fundamental fact that real power resides in the palace. In other countries, unrest continues but it has not yet led to significant change. In Bahrain, the Gulf monarchies rallied behind the embattled royal family, allowing it to harden its position in the face of two years of unrest predominantly originating from the Shia majority. And in Syria, a two-year war that has left tens of thousands of victims and displaced hundreds of thousands has so far led neither to a military victory by the rebels nor to a negotiated solution.

Underlying all uprisings was widespread popular dissatisfaction with economic conditions – not only poverty but also growing income disparities – and frustration of citizens who had no voice in the running of their countries. But despite the similarity of the grievances, the final outcomes of the uprisings will be as different as the paths of transformation have been, determined by social and political conditions in each country and by choices made by political actors. While all Arab transitions remain as works in progress, and it would be foolhardy to predict the outcome in any country after only two years, it is clear that they are all taking different paths.

Beyond the Islamist Model

An unexpected outcome of the uprisings has been the success of Islamist forces in most of the countries that held elections in 2011 and 2012. In Tunisia, the Ennahda Party won a plurality in the elections and formed a government in alliance with two secular parties. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood and the more radical Salafis gained about 70% of the seats in the Parliament, before it was disbanded by the courts in a highly political decision. Even in Morocco, where real power remains firmly in the hands of the King, the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) won a plurality of seats and formed the new government as prescribed by the new Constitution.

The rapid succession of victories by Islamist parties gave rise to intense speculation that Islamists would be the main beneficiaries of the changes taking place and to equally intense discussion about what "model" such parties would follow. Would it be a benign model such as the one established in Turkey by the AK Party? Or would the Islamist parties seek to transform their countries into Islamic states where laws would be entirely based on Sharia? Even worse, would the new Islamist regimes work with each oth-

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er across boundaries to revive a unified Islamic *umma* under a caliphate?

For Arab citizens on both sides of the Islamist/secular divide, these were crucial issues. While they are not completely settled yet, and will not be for some time, several conclusions can already be drawn. The first is that Islamist victories are not inevitable. The Libyan elections held in July 2012 did not result in an Islamist victory: Libyans are religious and conservative, indeed probably less secular than their neighbours, but the Islamist parties were new and not well organised. Islamist victories in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt were less a triumph of religion over secularism, than the prevailing of good organisation and discipline over loosely structured, squabbling secular parties. A second conclusion is that fears that Islamist parties will try to revive the caliphate to the detriment of the existing Arab nation-states are unfounded. There are certainly radical groups in all countries that hold up the caliphate as their ideal, but politics is securely rooted in the individual states. There is in fact little evidence that Islamist parties even devote much time and effort to communicating with each other across state boundaries.

Finally, Islamist parties are already revealing themselves to be affected by the usual vagaries of political life. Fairly or unfairly, after only a few months in power, Islamists are being blamed for problems that have been festering for decades – like the exorbitant cost of energy and food subsidies, for example. As a result, they will almost certainly lose some support in the next round of elections. There is now a model in the countries where uprisings have taken place, which, if not Islamist, is one of very messy pluralistic politics in societies where the new rules of the game are still not clearly established and accepted.

Tunisia and Egypt: Change through Popular Uprisings

Transformation came to Tunisia and Egypt through mass protests. Demonstrations spreading throughout the country, coupled with the collapse of security forces and the refusal of the military to intervene, led Tunisian President Zine el Abidine Ben Ali to flee on January 14, 2011 and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to resign a month later. But after the demise of the two Presidents, the paths taken by the two countries diverged drastically.

Tunisia followed an orderly, clear process of transition. It formed an interim government led by a veteran politician, Beji Caid Essebsi, who had been in retirement during the Ben Ali years and was therefore not compromised. With the support of the High Authority for the Achievement of the Revolution's Objectives, Political Reform and Democratic Transition, a motley coalition of parties and civil society groups, Essebsi managed to steer the country toward credible elections for a constituent assembly in October. The constituent assembly was expected not only to write the Constitution but also to serve as a Parliament. The parties had worked to reach an agreement on the transition process, but luck also intervened, because no party gained a large enough majority to govern alone or to impose its Constitution on the country – Ennahda won a plurality of seats, not the majority.

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Nevertheless, the transition to a new political system has not been easy. The writing of the Constitution, with all the compromises it has required has been painfully slow, and urgent socio-economic problems have not been addressed. The economy is beginning to recover, but very slowly. Tensions between secularists and Islamists are high, although the two sides recognise each other's legitimacy. And there remains the possibility of violence at the hand of Salafist and jihadist groups. But Tunisia is still proceeding on the basis of an agreed plan and making progress.

Egyptians, on the other hand, are mired in conflict, and the transition to a new political system has turned into a vicious circle, where no step appears to have been accomplished once and for all: a Parliament was elected and promptly disbanded, a Constitution enacted but not accepted, the interim military government stepped aside after the election

of a President but some Egyptians are signing petitions demanding its reinstatement. Compounding the problem, the economy is in free fall.

After the ousting of Mubarak, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over for an interim period of unspecified length. The country was divided about the sequencing of parliamentary and presidential elections and whether elections should be held before or after the writing of the Constitution. The SCAF finally opted for parliamentary elections first and presidential elections second. The Constitution would be written by an ad hoc committee chosen by the Parliament after both elections – this raised the possibility that the elected officials would see their powers altered midstream, since the President and the Parliament were elected for full terms.

The process was problematic and the difficulty was compounded by election results that gave the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis 70% of parliamentary seats in Parliament and a few months later gave the presidency to the Muslim Brotherhood, although by a narrow margin. The elections were not rigged – international and domestic observers all agreed on this point – but the outcome was unbalanced. The increasingly alarmed but politically weak secular opposition turned to state institutions still dominated by old regime appointees in an attempt to redress the balance. The Supreme Constitutional Court obliged, ruling in a highly political decision, that the election law was unconstitutional and ordering the lower house of Parliament to be dissolved.

A similarly confused battle took place around the formation of the constituent assembly. The courts rejected the first constituent assembly formed by the Parliament but never ruled on the constitutionality of the second, repeatedly postponing the decision. The constituent assembly thus operated for six months under constant threat of dissolution and with secular members only participating in its deliberations intermittently. Although it managed to produce a Constitution and to submit it to a referendum, the charter is considered illegitimate by the secular opposition.

The original transition plan was confused and poorly thought out. At this point, Egypt is still in the middle of a transition but with no plan at all. The Muslim Brotherhood wants elections for a new Parliament as soon as possible, but it has been thwarted again by the Supreme Constitutional Court's objections to some aspects of the election law. Elections have, therefore, been put on hold. The secular opposition, as disorganised as ever, wants to postpone elections. Street protests remain an integral part of politics, but the largely peaceful mass demonstrations that led to Mubarak's overthrow have given way to actions by smaller groups that often degenerate into violence. The transition appears deadlocked between a secular opposition that claims to support democracy but rejects democratic competition and Islamist parties that benefit from the democratic process but are not trusted to uphold democratic values. Calls for the military to take over again are multiplying – a sad conclusion to an uprising that started with great hope in January 2011.

Morocco: the Limits of Transformation from the Top

Beginning on 20 February, 2011 Morocco experienced its own wave of demonstrations. Within two weeks, however, the initiative had passed from the streets to the palace, with the King announcing that a new Constitution would be drafted in order to give the Parliament and the cabinet greater power. Before the end of the year, Morocco had a new Constitution, a new Parliament and a new cabinet headed by the Secretary General of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD), which had won a plurality in the elections.

Palace apologists present this transformation as a course of action freely chosen by the King at his own initiative rather than a response to unrest. The PJD leadership sees the change as the vindication of its choice of a "third way" to reform, namely through cooperation with the regime rather than confrontation. Both the palace and the PJD like to point out that their choices have made Morocco a model of peaceful transformation. Egypt is mired in confusion, Libya has no real central authority, Syria is in the throes of war, and even Tunisia is still struggling to enact a new Constitution, but Morocco is well on its way to constitutional monarchy, they argue.

Perhaps. But for many, and possibly most, Moroccan and outside observers, there are still questions about whether the reforms enacted so far are truly significant and above all whether they will continue. The cabinet has more power under the new Constitution, though the King can take back into his own hand any

issue he deems to have strategic importance. The PJD has made a policy choice never to challenge the King, and the secular parties represented in the Parliament are just as tame. Potential extra-parliamentary opposition groups are dormant: the February 20 Movement that led the 2011 demonstrations is no longer active; a large Islamist movement, al-Adl-wal-Ihsan, has never participated in politics and insists it will not do so in the near future; Salafist groups exist but they have not emerged as a political force; and the widespread socio-economic discontent does not have a focus. There is, therefore, little pressure on either the King or the PJD to act, and without pressure reform appears to be grinding to a halt.

Morocco might still prove to be a model of transformation from the top without crisis and without disruption. Or it may prove to be a model of a regime successfully outmanoeuvring the opposition in the short run and leaving the status quo virtually unchanged, only to run into a crisis in the longer run. The jury is still out.

Libya and Syria: Transformation through Military Conflict

In Libya and Syria, the instrument of political change has been armed conflict. Regime change has taken place in Libya, but in Syria the conflict continues, and the population is paying a high price. Violent conflict may become the major tool of change in other countries in the future, because incumbent regimes are now more likely to respond with force to popular uprisings. Autocratic Presidents in Tunisia and Egypt allowed themselves to be deposed without much resistance, possibly because they were caught by surprise by the scale of the demonstrations and the determination of the participants. In Libya and Syria, however, rulers knew what to expect and quickly mobilised the military. In response, the opposition also moved quickly from peaceful protests to the use of violence. Unfortunately, it is quite possible that the quick turn to violence will become the pattern for the future.

The transformation of Libya through military conflict took place with the support of the international community. The United Nations and the Arab League agreed on the necessity of an international intervention to impose a NATO-led no-fly zone on the country, while Gulf countries supplied arms to the rebels. The fighting on the ground was carried out by Libyan militias organised largely on a local basis – the character of the country, with a relatively small population concentrated in towns separated by vast stretches of empty territory, made this extreme decentralisation inevitable. The war only lasted from February to October 2011, but it has had long-lasting consequences.

The system created by Gaddafi was one of personal power and weak institutions, so it did not take long for the State to collapse. It had never been a cohesive State in the first place, but a rather lose amalgam of regions and tribes. The rebels recognised this early on, and made an attempt to set up a National Transitional Council (NTC) with broad representation. But the militias, armed and successful in their fight against Gaddafi, carried more weight than the new and untried civilian institutions. The NTC never succeeded in imposing its authority over the militias, and the General National Congress elected in July 2012 and the weak governments it set up have also failed so far.

Some of the militias are Islamist-oriented and have ties to radical jihadist groups in the region. But the main challenge in the Libyan transformation is less about controlling radical Islamist groups than building a state out of the fragmentation of tribes, regions and militias.

Change is also coming to Syria through civil war, but the conflict that started in early 2011 is proving much longer and bloodier than the one in Libya. The strength of the institutionalised Syrian State, including its military and the scant support for the Syrian rebels by the international community have prolonged the war. Without a no-fly zone imposed on Syria, the military has been able to use its air force against the rebels, killing tens of thousands of civilians and devastating cities in the process, but succeeding in maintaining its control over the country's core. Although victory for the rebels remains elusive, it is already clear that post-Assad Syria will be plagued by the problem of independent militias and multiple power centres. Efforts by the United States and Gulf countries have led to the establishment of a Syrian National Coalition, which, in theory, is tasked with forming a government in exile, as well as controlling the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and supervising the local councils being set up in the parts of Syria that are no longer under government control. In practice, the coalition has little influence over armed groups and even civilian councils. The most effective fighting forces are radical groups such as Jabat al

Nusra that do not answer to the FSA and do not receive aid from the West. Local councils appear to be organised in ad hoc fashion, on the basis of local conditions, and to differ widely from each other.

The elements of fragmentation that are starting to appear in the areas outside government control, with their patchwork of militias, local councils, even sharia courts, are complicated in Syria by the likelihood of sectarian conflict. To an extent, the war is already being fought along sectarian lines – the Assad regime is dominated by Alawites, a minority that politically if not theologically is considered Shia, and the ranks of the rebels are heavily Sunni – and issues of ethnic cleansing and revenge may well continue to fester even if the Assad regime is overthrown.

Military conflict has already been the instrument of transformation in Libya and will probably prove to be the same in Syria. And it is proving a costly one too, not only from a humanitarian point of view, but also because it leaves behind a legacy of fragmentation that will be particularly difficult to overcome.

Yemen: A Negotiated Transition in Slow Motion

Young people in Yemen bravely followed the example of their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world, taking to the streets and occupying the squares for weeks beginning in February 2011. President Ali Abdullah Saleh resisted. Soon, the initiative passed from the hands of Yemeni protesters and authorities to those of Saudi Arabia and other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which saw stability in Yemen essential to their own and tried to convince Saleh to step down and make way for a new government. The goal of the GCC countries was not democracy, but a less controversial government that could ensure stability.

Despite Yemen's dependence on financial support from its richer neighbours, Saleh proved extremely difficult to dislodge. On 23 April, 2011 he agreed to hand power to his vice-President within thirty days, opening the way for new elections. Immediately, he started raising objections and the thirty days passed without change.

On 3 June, however, Saleh was seriously wounded in an explosion within the presidential compound that claimed many casualties. Evacuated to Saudi Arabia for treatment, he did not give up, but returned to Yemen on 22 September, despite Saudi Arabia's opposition. In November, he reached a new deal with the GCC countries, which again called for the transfer of power to the vice-President and new elections.

This time the transfer took place, with vice-President Abdurabu Mansur Hadi dutifully elected to replace Saleh in a one-candidate election in February 2012. Still, Saleh continued to exercise an inordinate amount of influence, not least because control of elite military units remained in the hands of his son and two nephews. He finally left again to seek medical treatment in Saudi Arabia in April 2013, and shortly afterwards his son and nephews were eased out of their positions in the military and rewarded with diplomatic appointments instead.

Yemen, at last, appeared to be inching toward a turnover of leadership, but the country continued to be governed by a complex coalition of political organisations, tribal elements and personalities which could not easily be distinguished from Ali Abdullah Saleh's ruling apparatus.

Different Paths to Transformation

The initial events of the Arab uprising were dramatic and exciting. The reality of the transitions is quite different, difficult, slow and often confusing. Paths to transitions differ, as undoubtedly the outcomes will; but the process of change appears irreversible.

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