

WHEN THE SWEET “ARAB SPRING” TURNS SOUR: THE TIRES THAT BIND

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The “Arab Spring” is a great moment of history in our lifetimes. However, the uprisings and the related profound political transformation in the Arab world have aggravated many of the suppressed problems. A situation has clearly built up and escalated destabilization in the region, which has stained the desperate attempts toward freedom and democracy. The disorientation that has shaped the “Arab Spring” is unlikely to change for a long time to come and will reap bitter fruits. No one really knows when or if these fruits can ever sweeten.

Many Arabs could never think that the regional situation could ever bring about the exile of Ben Ali, the falling of Mubarak, the death of Gaddafi, the Bahraini recruiting of the Saudi military and many other examples of police states in the Middle East and North Africa collapsing.

The success of the first stages of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt caused euphoria in the West, which talked about a “fourth wave of democratization” that swept the Arab world and new opportunities for democratic transition of the Arab countries. Many inside and outside the region perceived these events as similar to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 signaling the end of the Cold War.

Arab publics remained bitter for a long time because they felt that the western media discriminated against them or looked down at them, but since 2011 the situation has been reversed. As media experts and politicians started to change their positions after the persistent sit-ins at the *Tahrir Square* (Liberation Square), it was defined as a “People Revolution.” These mediated events created theatrical scenes that nurtured an inspiring story line of an emerging “Arab Spring,” which started in Tunisia and provided the spark that set off fires elsewhere in the region, especially in Egypt.¹ It was thus rational to have an escalation effect in Lebanon: joint rallies of Egyptian Islamists and liberals against

the Mubarak regime; and elections in Iraq, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia.

One has to give credit to the movement for workers’ rights in *Al-Mabla al-Kabab* and the movement against police brutality and torture. The justification is related to how the civil society activists have built up constructive change when the mainstream media all too often lost their vital elements of balance, context, and primarily portrayed the negative side of the story.

In centre stage of the mediation of events, the savvy young Arabs are seen as models for a new kind of freedom, and the regional happenings have become a cover-age priority by international media in an unprecedented way. The success of these movements, at least in the early stages, meant that citizens and journalists seized the opportunity and used accessible media, such as cell phone videos and Tweets about protests: journalists followed their leads.

The main motivation behind this “rally around the flag” phenomenon was the shared frustrations; public deliberations were finally discussed in the open; and creating a better future was a hope of a real democratic revolution.

The fact remains that the discontented public, in particular the youth, resorted to every possible communication tool.² For example, orange T-shirts in Lebanon and the single word *Kifaya* (“enough”) in Egypt suggested the Arab equivalent of the Berlin Wall seemed at hand. However, there is a general trend in the media to limit the actors behind the uprisings to only the youth. There was much less interest in providing in-depth coverage of the related dramatic clash of cultures between the old and the new, of violence and peace, of the past and future, and the generational gap.

To understand the broader phenomenon of protests in MENA, one must consider the causality between the two key questions: What is the role of media in uprisings? How profound is the political change?

The departure point here is to contextualize the recurrent failure of the Arab states to conduct democratic reforms. Economic and social stagnation, the poor performance of political parties, the absence of an agreement of principle between the majority and the opposition regarding the rules of the political game led to the failure of democratic reforms.

Arab citizens gradually became motivated in spite of all the challenges to access information through alternative ways, depending on the availability of sources, economic background and level of digital literacy. Sadly, only very few had the privilege to become systematically exposed to competing perspectives of domestic and international events.⁵ Besides, the country cases vary significantly because the press in Morocco and Egypt has grown highly diverse, but pluralism is more limited in Syria and some of the Gulf countries.

One explanation for the misreading of events is that journalists and media scholars not residing in the region, especially with regard to language and cultural differences, have missed the gradual and systematic escalation of events over the last few decades.⁴

The political culture in the Arab world has traditionally been of an authoritarian and patriarchal nature which explains the long time that most Arab leaders have been in their posts. Moreover, top officials used media narratives to maintain the correlation between the identification of the West with the concept of “colonization.”⁵ However, there is an interesting generational difference in the social fabric of MENA, where the older generations were brought up in a rather tamed culture that resulted from the 1952 coup d'état against the status quo. They learned to be silent and passive, as described in Arabic: walk “near the wall” [meaning the walls of fear], and some of them have been living inside these shadows of fear.⁶ In contrast, the younger generations are still poor, and had neither hope nor anything to lose further.

As Magdy el-Galad, the editor-in-chief of the largest independent Egyptian newspaper, *Al-Masry al-Yawm* (*The Egyptian Today*), said in an interview in Al-Jazeera, “A new generation walks in the streets of Egypt. A generation that did not marry or have kids when everything was cheap. They cannot even find jobs that can pay

TABLE 1: INTERNET PENETRATION AND FACEBOOK PENETRATION IN MENA⁹

Middle East - June 30, 2011		Penetration Rate
Population Estimate	216,258,843	
Internet Users of the Population	72,497,466	33.5%
Facebook Users	16,125,180	7.5%

them 30 pounds in public or private sectors. They use the internet to go beyond Egypt and open up the whole world. They have nothing to worry about, no kids, no wife, no home, and no money.”

Though the word “revolution” has become very popular, ethical questions related to the accuracy, reliability and credibility of information and sources are also present. “A lot of the tweets were not verified,” said Andy Carvin, who heads NPR’s social media efforts.⁷

MENA states have hundreds of millions of people, where many are under the age of 30 (almost 30 percent); they share a hunger for change and progress, and a desire to achieve their aspirations, which made them advocate a new way to deliver progressive change, equality and rights.

It is thus not surprising that the younger generations have played a significant role in the uprisings, motivated by their better levels of access to media (particularly the new media), the opportunities they were entitled to have and the assets they have accumulated.⁸

Only 33.5 percent of the population in the Middle East and North Africa have internet access, but the number who use Facebook is even lower, reaching 7 percent. As such, the Internet cannot be the main source of information to the citizens before and during the uprisings.

Many Arabs have no internet access at all. For example, less than 9 percent of Egyptians have internet access at home, and in Yemen only 3 percent have internet access at home, according to a 2009 survey conducted by The Gallup Organization. In Tunisia the figure climbs to 21 percent and in Bahrain to 80 percent, according to the same survey. No one has described events in these countries as a Facebook or Twitter revolutions.

MENA countries generally have highly regulated internet providers, especially MENA states that have in-

vested heavily in blocking and filtering software, according to Ahmed Al Hujairy, the president of the Bahrain Internet Society.¹⁰ Besides, the internet itself does not produce political revolutions, but allows elite dissidents to quickly contact other elite dissidents and build a tiny virtual community. Mass revolt, as seen across the Arab world, requires something more.¹¹

The financial burden of using the internet becomes another hurdle facing many poor Arabs, who might be lucky to be literate and luckier to have digital literacy. Internet cafes in major Arab cities charge by the minute and that makes it impossible to motivate users to keep online time for long even if they have the motivation, the skills and the access because they simply cannot afford it.

In contrast, one could refer to cell phones as the main source of communication that was clearly used to convey messages and capture photos. And even when correspondents were banned, young Arab activists were able to bypass constraints by sending video shots to satellite stations like *Al-Jazeera*.

Table 2 shows that cell-phone penetration is extremely high in the countries that have experienced political change. For example, Egypt has the largest number in the Arab world, while Bahrain, Tunisia and Yemen have almost as many mobile phones as they have people.

Also important is the role played by person-to-person calls, because on many occasions word-of-mouth was very important in mobilizing the public. This might explain how the young protestors decided to take matters into their own hands, and go into other neighbourhoods and convince people to gather at the square. As stated by Tawfik Gammal,¹³ "We're going to go out on the streets and start screaming 'Down with Mubarak' and asking people to join us. Once we get about 1,000 or 2,000, we will move toward downtown."

This current picture is dim for many reasons that included policy brutality against civilians and the emergence of Islamists, and attacks against Egyptian Christians (Copts).

First, Egypt experienced in October what is now known as the "Bloody Sunday" protests: at least 27 civilians were killed and 300 wounded.¹⁴ This bloody violence has left Egypt on the brink of a potential disaster. The military, the only stable institution left from the Mubarak era, lost its credibility after unleashing a deadly attack against civilian protesters. While many concluded that

TABLE 2: CELL-PHONE PENETRATION IN THE UPRISING AREAS¹²

Country	2000	2010
Bahrain	205,727	1,367,000
Egypt	1,359,900	70,661,005
Libya	40,000	10,900,000
Syria	30,000	11,696,212
Tunisia	119,165	11,114,206
Yemen	32,042	11,085,000

the violence was rooted in a sectarian conflict between the army and Egyptian Copts, that situation still impacts the authority of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) in the eyes of Egyptians of all religions.

Second, among many incidents a peaceful march¹⁵ by Copts against religious persecution gave way to a night of violence after the protesters were attacked. The army used tear gas to disperse protesters at Maspero (a TV building in downtown Cairo), where rocks were thrown down from the 6 October Bridge by police and armed forces. Security forces chased any protesters who had congregated on the bridge away from Maspero with tear-gas canisters halting down throughout.

Third, Islamists are ready to jump into the front stage of offering a redefined Arab model of Islamic democracy, which makes the Arab society not ready for democratic transitions. Tunisia can serve as an example where in recent parliamentary elections, the Islamic *Ennahda Party*, which stands ready to cooperate with secular parties and for further democratization, won over 40 percent of the vote. Egypt is no different with the increasing role of *Muslim Brotherhood* and where Islamic parties are winning elections in various academic institutions and socialist guilds. For example, the *Freedom and Justice Party* created by the *Muslim Brotherhood*, which will pursue an "Islamic democracy" formula, has the best chance of winning the parliamentary elections this November.

The "Arab Spring" has ended a system of political management that existed for decades. It is almost impossible for MENA countries to return to their pre-revolutionary state. The new Arab mind has brought about irreversible transformation, which will alter the situation within the Arab states and at regional and global levels. The Arab street is in a chaotic phase and the public is at a loss as to the future course.

This new political environment has signalled a collapse of the state-owned media, which used to define news. But no one is certain about the time it will take to realize the change in values and public engagement. In addition, one must realize that the real transformation has barely begun even though the despots are gone. The events of 2011 demonstrate more clearly than anything else the heterogeneous nature of MENA, where the monarchies, republics, and jama'hiyya alike have all faced popular protest to one degree or another, yet some have stood and some have crumbled.

Many of the countries have to various degrees some of the prerequisites for a constitutional government; among them are a mature democracy, economic progress and social justice with a strong civil society, a history of labour organization, many highly educated people and some strong institutions.¹⁶ The region was not ready for this quick move to democracy, which associated the radical changes to radical results, especially in the current economic and civil anarchy. One of the deepest social

cleavages is the high rates of illiteracy in addition to the poverty and unemployment that remain a hurdle for any constructive development.

The dim reality is that in the near future conditions could turn sour, whether through civil war in Libya or Yemen, paralysis in Tunisia and Egypt, or endless fruitless contestation with those in power in Bahrain, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Iraq and elsewhere including Egypt and Tunisia.

The words of Khalil Gibran, Arab poet and essayist, "And my heart bled within me; for you can only be free when even the desire of seeking freedom becomes a harness to you, and when you cease to speak of freedom as a goal and a fulfillment. You shall be free indeed when your days are neither without a care nor your nights without a want and a grief."

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ENDNOTES

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