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Middle East Brief

Lessons from the Jasmine and Nile Revolutions: Possibilities of Political Transformation in the Middle East?

Prof. Eva Bellin

The political ferment unleashed by the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia (December 17, 2010–January 14, 2011) and the Nile Revolution in Egypt (January 25, 2011–February 11, 2011) has been unprecedented and breathtaking. Never before has popular protest brought down an authoritarian regime in the Arab world. And never had anyone anticipated the speed with which such deeply entrenched regimes might be overthrown. The quick succession of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia by the fall of Mubarak in Egypt raised the hope among Arab political activists that a contagious wave of revolution might soon usher in democratic transition throughout the Middle East. But close analysis of these two cases suggests a different scenario. This Brief argues that these two uprisings were successful thanks to a particular set of conditions that are not easy to replicate in the Arab world as a whole. Furthermore, transition to democracy does not necessarily come after the end of dictatorship. By analyzing the dynamics of these two revolutions and their immediate aftermath in both countries, we will gain leverage on the possibilities and limitations of revolutionary replication and democratic transition elsewhere in the region.

The Puzzle of Popular Mobilization: Grievance is Not Enough

The Jasmine and Nile revolutions began with the successful mobilization of popular protest. But such mobilization poses a puzzle. How do we explain the sudden willingness of thousands of ordinary citizens to join in protests after years of political lethargy? Many have argued that a triad of grievances involving repression, corruption, and economic hardship motivated the protesters. The regimes of both Ben Ali and Mubarak were renowned for harassing opposition figures, suppressing political activism and civil liberties, and opposing any sort of electoral reform that might have fostered political change. The ruling elite in both countries routinely engaged in bribery, kickbacks, and cronyism, cavalierly flouting the law to indulge their taste for extravagantly conspicuous consumption. And economic hardship remained a reality for most citizens in both countries. In Tunisia this manifested itself in extraordinarily high unemployment levels that hovered around 15 percent for the country as a whole but exceeded 30 percent for young people between the ages of 15 and 29 and surpassed a whopping 46 percent among college-educated youth. In Egypt, economic hardship manifested itself in terms of punishingly high rates of poverty: According to the World Bank, 40 percent of the Egyptian population lives below the poverty line of \$2 a day.

Without doubt these grievances were serious. But grievances alone do not suffice to explain mass mobilization, because as vexing as these ills were, they had plagued both countries for decades. Yet never before had they sparked popular protest in any sustained way. Furthermore, the same three grievances have long afflicted almost every country in the region, often to a degree that dwarfed the experience of Tunisia (though perhaps less so Egypt). The grinding poverty found in Yemen and the outsized kleptocracy found in Saudi Arabia far eclipsed Tunisia's difficulties. If magnitude of grievance were the sole factor determining the likelihood of protest, Tunisia would have been the least likely site for launching this sudden wave of mobilization..

So why did protest take off in Tunisia and Egypt, and why now? Four factors proved essential to this process: an emotional trigger, a sense of impunity, a professional military, and new social media.

An Emotional Trigger

As any student of revolution knows, the average person doesn't take to the streets as a consequence of carefully thought-through policy analysis or deeply held ideological convictions. Rather, people take to the streets in large numbers when they feel compelled by some strong emotion, such as anger, fear, or euphoria. In Tunisia, the emotional trigger was outrage. In Egypt, outrage also played a role in triggering mobilization, but so did the positive emotion of euphoria. In both cases, emotional triggers served as the spark that lit the underlying tinder of long-term economic and political grievances.

In the Tunisian case, two incidents in particular sparked the outrage that brought people out into the streets in December and January. The first was the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, the fruit vendor who set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid after city officials seized his means of livelihood, publicly humiliated him, and cavalierly ignored his quest for restitution. Bouazizi's experience exemplified the humiliating disrespect and disregard so many Tunisians had felt at the hands

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of the state. In addition, his experience of joblessness and his reduction to unlicensed street vending captured the economic hopelessness many young Tunisians felt. Bouazizi's plight resonated broadly in Tunisian society and the regime's culpability in his condition ignited the public's fury.

The second factor that sparked popular outrage in Tunisia was the fact that the regime resorted to lethal force to put down the demonstrations that had begun in December. It is one thing for the state to repress protesters with tear gas and billy clubs. It is another thing to post snipers on building rooftops to shoot to kill their fellow citizens. By mid-January, reports were that Tunisian security forces had killed seventy-eight people. In fact, many more had actually been killed. This resort to lethal force further stoked outrage in Tunisian society.

In Egypt, outrage was sparked by a number of circumstances: the regime's brutal murder of rights activist Khaled Said, widely publicized on Facebook; the stolen elections of November 2010, wherein opposition forces were denied any credible representation; and the midwinter spike in the price of basic food commodities, which hammered Egypt's poor. But even more than outrage, the most proximate emotional trigger that brought people out into the streets in Egypt was a positive emotion: euphoria! The rapid fall of the dictator in Tunisia gave Egyptians the feeling that suddenly the impossible was possible. Perhaps the old autocrats could be dislodged, if only the people stood together. The joy and hope generated by the Tunisian example proved as important as any other emotional trigger in motivating people to join in the protests in Egypt.

But although emotional triggers played an important role in mobilizing the first round of demonstrations in both countries, the numbers of protesters would never have swelled to regime-challenging magnitude had it not been for a second factor: impunity.

Impunity and the Calculation of Risk

Participation in mass protest is to some degree a matter of cost-benefit calculation. Aside from die-hard activists, most people are reluctant to participate in protests if they think it likely that they will get hurt or killed in the process of participating. However, if people are persuaded that the costs of participation are not grave they will be more likely to join in. This is why one often sees a cascade effect in such protests: Once a demonstration reaches a certain size, it tends to snowball. Why? Simply because the more people join in a protest, the lower the chance of any given individual's getting hurt. There is safety in numbers. Thus, rational calculation of risk determines, to some degree, when people will mobilize.

In Tunisia, rational calculation of risk led people to join the demonstrations in large numbers once one crucial fact became clear: that the military would not shoot. This became evident when a You Tube video showed the military not only refusing to shoot at a crowd of protestors but actually appearing to run interference between the police (who *had* been attacking the crowds) and the protestors. As soon as this video went viral, on January 13, it was clear that the game was up. Once people became persuaded that the military was hesitating in its willingness to back the regime, the risk of protesting declined precipitously: People came to believe that they could protest with impunity. That decreased sense of threat fueled massive participation in the protests. People responded in huge numbers to the call to join the demonstrations in downtown Tunis. By January 14 (according to the next day's *New York Times*), more than 10,000 people had massed on Avenue Habib Bourguiba—numbers that no police force alone could contain.¹ Consequently, when the military informed Ben Ali they would not step in to defend him from the crowds, the president had no choice but to flee.

A somewhat similar scenario played out in Egypt. Early on, the Egyptian military signaled that it would not shoot on the crowds. At first, the military relied on tear gas and water cannons in an attempt to disperse the protestors. But by January 29 it was evident that the military had decided to focus on protecting government buildings rather than intervening against the demonstrators. On January 31 a military spokesman explicitly declared on state TV that “the military understood the legitimacy of [the protestors'] demands” and that “the armed forces will not resort to force against our great people.”² Consequently, aside from two days during the first week of protests, when regime-sponsored thugs violently assaulted demonstrators, a sense of impunity developed. A carnival-like atmosphere prevailed in Maidan al-Tahrir: People brought their children to witness the historic moment. The number of people gathering in the public squares swelled.

Military Professionalism

The military's decision to defect is pivotal to explaining the snowballing of mass protest as well as the dictator's obligation to flee. This raises the larger question of when the military *will* defect. The answer lies in the character of the military and whether it is institutionally invested in the survival of the ruler. If the military is professional, if it is not linked by blood or kinship to the ruler, if it is not enmeshed in crony-capitalist links with the regime, it will be more likely to abandon a ruler under challenge. The military will seek to defend its interests as an institution, and this might be wholly compatible with holding its fire, siding with protestors, and ushering in regime change. This is because a directive to fire on civilians is institutionally

costly to the military. Such a directive is at odds with the military's institutional imperative to defend the nation. Obeying it might seriously compromise the military's legitimacy and internal discipline, and might encourage the rank and file to desert (as was the case in the Iranian Revolution of 1979). Faced with these potential costs, the military may decide that it is in its institutional interest to hold its fire. Rather, it is likely to opt for delivering what David Sorensen calls in his work on civil-military relations in the Middle East "the velvet shove" to the ruler.

This was precisely what happened in Tunisia. In contrast to most of its neighbors, Tunisia long boasted a military that was both professional and historically removed from politics. The country's founding father, Habib Bourguiba, always kept the military small and far from power. This was evidenced by the fact that until 1987, the fateful year in which Ben Ali was appointed by Bourguiba to head the Ministry of Interior, no military officer had ever served as a minister in Tunisia. Interestingly, even after Ben Ali came to power, the new president persisted in keeping the military at arm's length. He never shared with it the spoils of power, nor did he favor it with special economic treatment. In this way, the military in Tunisia was not patrimonially linked to the regime nor was it institutionally invested in Ben Ali's survival. When the president instructed the military to shoot (which would likely have set off a delegitimizing massacre), the military was able to instead imagine sending Ben Ali packing. So it refused. Had the military not taken this stand, Tunisia's popular uprising would likely not have resulted in regime change. But once the military chose to abandon the regime, Ben Ali had no choice but to flee.

In the case of Egypt, the situation was a bit more complicated. Egypt's military had a strong reputation for professionalism (bolstered by its ties with the U.S. military, and by the widespread national legitimacy it enjoyed), and its leadership was not linked by blood or marriage to the family of Hosni Mubarak. As such it could entertain defecting from an alliance with the autocrat. At the same time, Egypt's military had long participated in the governing of the country and had strong crony-capitalist links with the regime—so it had good reason to be deeply invested in the status quo. As a result, it was unclear which way the military would lean. In the end, professionalism and popular legitimacy won out over investment in Mubarak's survival. The military declared its allegiance to the youth of Egypt and delivered the velvet shove to Mubarak.

Social Media as Enabler

Finally, one other factor that must be highlighted to explain the timing and success of the popular uprisings

in both Tunisia and Egypt is the role of social media. In prior years, mobilization of political protest had been undermined by two factors: societal collusion and state repression. Many Egyptians and Tunisians willingly bought into the "authoritarian bargain" offered by the regime in power: They exchanged political quiescence for stability (as well as economic growth, in the Tunisian case, that was the envy of much of the region). But even those citizens who rejected the authoritarian bargain found their capacity to organize politically blocked: The Tunisian and Egyptian regimes did everything in their power to suppress opposition and to atomize society. Political activists were arrested and brutalized; public gatherings were controlled when not forbidden; speech was censored; and publications (especially in Tunisia) were often shut down. Here is where social media come in. New social media (and I include under this rubric Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and cell phones with video feed capacity) enabled the mobilization of collective action in ways that were heretofore impossible in repressive settings. Social media provided a platform for conveying the stories and symbols that fueled mass participation in protest. The Facebook pages devoted to Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation and Khaled Said's brutalization along with the video feeds of early rounds of demonstrations were crucial prods. Both egged others on to join the wave of protest and as a result vastly increased the level of participation.

Social media provided the means for coordinating and synchronizing the actions of thousands of people, thereby making mass gatherings possible even in the absence of any formal organizational infrastructure (something the regime would have worked hard to decimate). Most important, the anonymity and spontaneity of social media enabled them to escape the control and repression of the authoritarian state. More than any other factor, new social media explain why this wave of protest was possible now.

Revolutionary Replication?

Turning to the question of the possibility of replication of these revolutions in other countries in the region, we must determine whether the conditions that enabled the success of the Jasmine and Nile Revolutions are likely to be found in other Middle Eastern and North African countries. Do the citizens in these countries hold deep-seated grievances against their regimes? Are the emotional triggers present that are likely to bring people out into the streets? Is the military sufficiently professional and sufficiently uninvested in the regime to refuse a directive to shoot on protesters—and will that bring about the sense of impunity so essential to the snowballing of protest, thereby compelling the undefended autocrat to flee? And

is there sufficient access to social media to evade state repression during the mobilization of protest?

Replication of these conditions is not easy. Deep-seated political and economic grievances are nearly ubiquitous in the region, and the primary complaints of most citizens in neighboring countries echo those found in Tunisia. But as we noted earlier, grievances alone are not sufficient to ignite mass protest. What about the presence of outrage or some other emotional trigger to propel people into the streets? This is more complicated. Clearly there is a great deal of popular anger directed at the regimes in many Middle East and North African countries. The problem is that in a good number of these countries, that anger is counterbalanced by some grudging support for, or even investment in, the regime. Take, for example, the case of Syria, a country deeply riven by sectarian cleavage. Many in Syrian society revile the authoritarian regime led by the Assad family. But they are also terrified that should the regime fall, it will take the lid off a boiling cauldron of sectarian hatred, and Syria might descend into civil war in the manner of Lebanon. That is, many Syrians hate the regime, but they fear sectarian chaos even more—thereby dousing popular outrage to some degree.

Similarly, consider Saudi Arabia. This is a country in which corruption and cronyism are present in epic proportions—but the regime has always made it a point to spread the wealth around society and broadly distribute patronage. As a result, a fair number of people are invested in the regime's survival. Or take the case of Algeria. Many in Algerian society are angry at the regime's repressiveness, as well as at the persistence of economic hardship. But after a decade of civil war that saw over 150,000 people killed during the 1990s, Algerians are exhausted and desperate for political stability. They are grudgingly invested in the regime—and decidedly unenthusiastic about the tumult that typically accompanies revolution.

The point is that in many MENA countries, for reasons specific to the conditions of each country, there are sizeable portions of society who remain invested in the regime in power. You don't generally find the same sweeping consensus of opposition that was present in Tunisia, and this works to diminish popular outrage. It puts a dent in the contagion of mobilization against the regime, leaving the underlying sense of grievance to smoulder rather than become enflamed.

Of course, as we saw in the Egyptian case, outrage is not the only emotional trigger that can propel people into the streets. Positive emotions can prove just as powerful motivators as negative ones. There is no explaining

the upsurge in popular mobilization in Egypt without reference to the sense of optimism and possibility generated by the Tunisian precedent. But the power of the Tunisian example should not be overestimated. In the interim there have been unsuccessful uprisings as well, in which protest sparked the harshest of crackdowns and even the threat of civil war. The cases of Bahrain and Libya serve as cautionary tales, especially in countries deeply divided along sectarian and tribal lines—and these cases are likely to rein in the otherwise euphoric contagion of the Tunisian example.

Related to these considerations is the character of the military in any given country and its investment in regime survival. In many Arab countries, the military leadership is patrimonially linked to the ruling elite either by blood or by marriage. In others it is seriously enmeshed in cronyistic economic ties to the regime. In all such cases, the military is deeply invested in regime survival. Consequently, when faced with the decision to shoot or defect, the military in these countries will be more likely to shoot. This is especially true where the military is divided from the general population along sectarian or tribal lines. Historically, we have seen evidence of the military's willingness to massacre in situations as diverse as Syria (the case of Hama) and Algeria (the civil war of the 1990s), and most recently in Bahrain. In such situations, a sense of impunity will be absent, and any potential snowball effect on mobilization will be constrained. Even more significantly, with the military unwilling to defect, the ruler will not be forced to flee.

Finally, social media may prove less effective in other countries in enabling activists to evade state control. Regimes learn from past mistakes, and there are ingenious ways in which authoritarian governments can use new social media to track and undermine opposition figures. Most clumsily, authoritarian regimes can shut down social media for short periods of time in order to stanch the contagion of protest. But of all the tactics likely to inhibit mobilization, this is the one least likely to be effective. People have proven surprisingly nimble in evading state control of social media, in part by exploiting the diversity of media available to them. For example, when the Egyptian regime took the unprecedented step of shutting down the Internet at the height of the protests, Egyptians learned of the location of new protests by relying on live feeds submitted by cell phone to Al Jazeera Television. These feeds were then broadcast in cafés throughout the country.

Long-Term Implications: Is This the Start of a Wave of Democratic Transition?

As we have seen, sustained mass protest and the flight of autocrats en masse are not a done deal in the MENA countries. But even if all the autocrats were to depart, would this necessarily start a wave of democratic transition in the region? Scholars of democratization have long argued that transition from authoritarianism to democracy is a two-step process. First, you must bring down the authoritarian regime; second, you must build the basis for democracy. These are quite independent processes, and success in one does not necessarily spell success in the other. Bringing down an authoritarian government often requires some sort of economic, military, or other crisis that makes the coercive apparatus collapse or abandon the regime in power. But just because an authoritarian regime is unseated doesn't mean that a democratic regime will necessarily take its place. In fact, the more common scenario historically is for one authoritarian regime to be replaced by another authoritarian regime. The fall of the Shah in Iran is a case in point: Popular mobilization brought down the Shah, only to have him replaced by an authoritarian regime of a somewhat different flavor.

To build a democracy on the ruins of authoritarianism is a daunting task, but several conditions may facilitate a successful transition. Historically, a certain level of economic development, higher levels of literacy, the existence of a sizeable middle class, and the absence of deep sectarian and/or ethnic cleavage have all made the establishment of a viable democracy more likely. Most important of all is the presence of a credible elite that is committed to adopting the defining institutions of democracy: free and fair elections, universal suffrage, and guaranteed civil liberties.

In the case of Tunisia, conditions are more favorable for democratic transition than in most neighboring countries. The country boasts high levels of literacy and a large middle class. It is largely homo-geneous ethnically and religiously. And it is not beset with the grinding poverty that plagues countries like Egypt or Yemen. Like many of its neighbors, however, the country suffers from a political vacuum. Decades of authoritarian rule have flattened civil society and prevented democratically minded elites from building effective bases and networks. As such the country has been impeded with respect to establishing effective parties, holding competitive elections, and putting in place other such institutional building blocks of democracy. But so far the country has proven surprisingly successful at eliminating the old ruling

elite. By continually reassembling sizeable but peaceful protests, democratic forces in Tunisia have managed to force the ruling party to dissolve and its leaders to step down from posts at both the national and local levels; to set dates for new elections; and to agree on the terms of electoral and constitutional reform. The transition process has gotten off to a surprisingly good start.

In Egypt, conditions are not quite as favorable for democratic transition, but neither are they wholly inauspicious. Like Tunisia, Egypt is ethnically homogeneous, boasts a healthy sense of national coherence, and has a strong state tradition, all of which bode well for democratic transition. At the same time, however, Egypt's middle class is small, illiteracy remains a significant problem (especially in rural areas), and poverty is pervasive. And as in Tunisia, Egypt's civil society has been weakened by decades of authoritarian predation. Most problematic is whether the military elite will prove truly committed to implementation of real political reform. Should they oversee free and fair elections for both Parliament and the presidency as promised and should they endorse the rewriting of the constitution along lines that will protect the institutional foundations of democracy, then Egyptian democracy may move forward, even if messily.

But whether such democratic transition can be replicated in neighboring countries in the region is more tenuous. Besides the fact that dictators elsewhere may prove more successful in holding on to power for reasons described above, many of these countries face social and economic realities that are far less favorable to democratic success. Many suffer from deep division along sectarian and/or tribal lines; many have low levels of literacy (especially among women); and many suffer from widespread poverty and have a relatively small middle class. And nearly all labor in a political vacuum, since all the authoritarian regimes in the region adopted the same playbook of repressing opposition elites and atomizing civil society. None of this is to say that democratic transition is impossible—only that it faces many challenges.

The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions constitute important breakthroughs in Arab politics, and their success at democratization may provide important precedents. Political analysts have long acknowledged the importance of the so-called “demonstration effect” in spreading democracy, and the urge to emulation among other countries is most powerful when the “demonstrator” country or countries are both geographically proximate and culturally and historically similar. Were Tunisia and Egypt to succeed at democratic transition, they would be the first Arab states to accomplish this fully. Replication

will not be easy, but as we have seen with regard to the mobilization of protest, success breeds hope and optimism: The improbable suddenly becomes possible. With the Jasmine and Nile revolutions, Tunisia and Egypt have breached an important impasse. For the first time in the Arab world, “people power” has brought down dictatorship. Perhaps in the long run these two revolutions will mark the first step toward the process of institutionalizing people power throughout the Arab world.

Endnotes

- 1 David Kirkpatrick, “Tunisia Leader Flees and Prime Minister Claims Power,” *New York Times*, January 14, 2011.
- 2 David Kirkpatrick, “Mubarak’s Grip on Power is Shaken,” *New York Times*, January 31, 2011.



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