

The Political Situation and the Role of the West in the Arab Uprisings

Dr. Abdullahi Ayoade Ahmad

Abstract: The Arab uprisings met several analysts, scholars, writers, predictors and even fortune-tellers unaware. Having begun in Tunisia, in only a few months of its commencement a clear indication emerged to suggest that Arab societies are embarked on a true democratic political reform. The subsequent fall of authoritarian governments in several Arab states such as Egypt, Libya, and Yemen cements this belief. Ironically, after over four years of the uprisings, the early belief seems to have faded in some countries such as Egypt and Libya, and it seems that revolutionists are hoping to return to life before the uprising, as the struggle for change has proven more difficult than anticipated. Countries like Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt seems to have had their revolutionary efforts hijacked either by opposing ideology or Western influences. To some extent, apart from Tunisia, Western influences and interferences have largely contributed to the result of the uprising. On one hand, the West wants to maintain the presence of authoritarian regimes as far as it serves its interest. On the other, it prefers to pretend as if it upholds the principle of democracy by popular voices and choices in the Arab world. This paper examines the role of the West in the Arab uprising, whether such role represents Arab revolutionary vision or not, and to what level has it affected the outcomes of the uprising? The paper concludes with recommendations for political stability in the Arab states. The research adopts descriptive and analytical methods, and the outcome shows that the West has contributed heavily to the instability and unrest across the Arab region.

Keywords: Arab Uprising, Dictatorship, Political Freedom, West, National Interest, Stability.

1. INTRODUCTION

The current political outbreak in the Arab region is the by-product of a number of domestic, regional, and global arrangements including a distant outcome of the post-World War II international order. The establishment of the League of Arab States did not reflect popular sentiment of Arab people but rather the desires of its elites in the newly independent states and the support of the region's former superpower (Britain). Widespread demands for Arab unity were side-tracked and suppressed by autocratic regime through all necessary means. The decline in the role of European powers, particular France and Britain, encouraged more Arab states to evolve and acquire independence in the 1950s and 1960s. For years, violence swept through most of the newly formed states, in the form of military coups, while the fabric of the Arab state system was more clearly defined only in the late 1960s and early 1970s [1].

The Arab Spring began in Tunisia in late 2010, when a self-immolation of a street vendor in a provincial town of Sidi Bouzid sparked mass anti-government protests. Within a short period, the protest escalated beyond government control forcing President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to relinquish power and flee to Saudi Arabia in January 2011 after 23 years of rule. The Tunisian revolution inspired similar uprisings across the Arab states over the next few months [15]. After the success of Tunisia, the Arab Spring became a series of anti-government protests, uprisings, and armed rebellions that spread across the Middle East. The Arab Spring was the expression of a deep seated resentment at the ageing Arab dictatorships, anger towards the brutality of the security apparatus, unemployment, rising of commodity price, and corruption that followed the privatisation of state assets in some countries and the general immunity to democratic change. These coalitions of activist reformers and ordinary citizens surprisingly succeeded in removing dictators who had spent decades entrenching themselves in power [2].

Unlike the Communists of the former Soviet Union in 1989, there was no consensus on the political and economic model that should replace the existing systems. Although the whole scenario was sudden, protesters in monarchies like Jordan and Morocco wanted to reform the system under the current rulers, some calling for an immediate transition to

constitutional monarchy while others preferring gradual reform. Places like Egypt and Tunisia with republican regimes, people were focused on overthrowing their long time dictators. Apart from their agitation for greater social justice, there was neither a magic wand for the economy nor for clear political reforms. Some leftist groups and unions wanted higher wages and a reversal of dodgy privatisation deals; others wanted liberal reforms to make more room for the private sector. Some hard-line Islamists were more concerned with enforcing strict religious norms. Although almost all political parties pledged to create jobs, none came close to developing a programme with tangible economic policies. Therefore, the purpose, relative success and outcome of Arab uprisings remain hotly disputed in Arab countries, among foreign observers, and between global powers [3].

The term *spring* was first known as a reference to the turmoil in Eastern Europe in 1989, when seemingly impregnable Communist regimes began falling under pressure from mass popular protests in a domino effect. In a short period, most countries in the former Communist bloc adopted democratic political systems with a market economy. The term was later applied by the Western media in the early 2011, when the successful uprising in Tunisia against its former leader felt similar whereby anti-government protests in most Arab countries toppled some of their leaders. The events in the Middle East went in a less straightforward direction, whereby Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen entered an uncertain transition period. Syria and Libya were drawn into a civil conflict, while the wealthy monarchies in the Persian Gulf remained largely unshaken by the events. The use of the term the Arab Spring has since been criticised for being inaccurate and simplistic [3].

Arab leaders in Jordan, Algeria, Morocco and Oman were forced into quick reform. In fact Saudi Arabi quickly turned its' reserve resources to improve the basic fundamental human benefits such as education and other welfare [10]. Interestingly, the impact of the Arab Spring was even echoed beyond Arab nations, the Chinese Communist Party's quashed pro-democratic demonstrations before they emerged. In Russia, the state-controlled media convinced domestic audiences that chaos and instability is the consequence of the Arab protests, and a similar suggestion for political reform in Russia would have the same catastrophic results. In other Eurasian countries and in parts of Africa, the authorities went to considerable lengths to suppress demonstrations and blackmailed the democratic opposition [2].

2. THE ARAB POLITICAL CONDITION PRIOR TO THE UPRISINGS

Whether in monarchies or republics, capitalist-communist or liberal economic market, the new Arab heads of state invariably relied on a number of tools in their attempt to consolidate their grip on power. These tools became characteristics of the Arab state system, until the Arab street revolted and mobilised its forces to rid itself of many decades of decadence and ineptness. The situation that led to street protest can be concluded as follows:

First, corruption, fraud, and nepotism have been systematically rampant to the extent that the rule of law was absent. For instance, the majority of elections casted in the Arab world typically produced over 90% support in favour of the ruler. Parliaments and peoples' assemblies served to further legitimise and back the head of state, rather than to legislate or to limit executive powers. Second, almost all Arab countries adopted a one-party system to become the operative ruling measure in the newly formed Arab states. Attempts to organise other political parties or movements other than the ruling regime were subjected to systematic victimisation and other harsh treatments. In case of any strong opposition, such will be blackmailed and considered to pose a threat to national security, and strict laws were imposed to stymie all political democratic efforts [4].

Third, even though the majority of Arab countries were formed as a result of wars of independence, their new leaders worked tirelessly to crush opposition, while at the same time violating human rights and reducing to mockery the dignity of the Arab citizen. A cruel prison system was established and those opponents who were not killed or imprisoned were forced to seek refuge outside their countries. As a result, the Arab citizen could not proudly test liberty or justice, while in theory foreign concepts of freedom, democracy, and equality were pretended as if it were in the conduct of their governance. Fourth, Arab heads of state equally cast blame for their own failures on outside powers. They contended that any protests are part of conspiracies directed at their inviolable rule. Failure of Arab leaders to admit responsibility was most clearly shown in dealing with dissent. Whether in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Syria or Bahrain, opponents and demonstrators have been labelled as traitors, gangsters, drug addicts and terrorists. More so, the plight of the Palestinian people has been equally misused and abused by Arab rulers. Despite their understanding of the centrality of the question of Palestine among the Arab peoples, the ruler's rhetorically championed support for the Palestinians in an attempt to galvanise domestic support, while in reality back-stabbing the Palestinians at every available opportunity [5].

The current age of globalisation has changed global awareness and access to information. It is no longer the monopoly of the state. Given the ferocity of the tyrants in holding onto power from cradle to cascade, it should not have come as a surprise that the Arab street finally decided to revolt. As a result, momentous change is taking place in the Arab world whereby revolutions have become widespread and their impact has been domestic, regional, and global. The situation left Zine Al-Abideen Bin Ali of Tunisia, who brutally suppressed Tunisian opposition and forced them to exile, with no choice but to escape under the cover of darkness to Saudi Arabia. Others followed such as Mubarak of Egypt, Qaddafi of Libya, and Abdullah Ali Saleh of Yemen to mention a few. People nervously waited to see how the situation in Syria would unfold. Although each Arab society has its internal and external political and economic particularities, commonalities during the Arab Spring are quite striking. The fact that there is no longer any scary ghost of the unchallengeable tyrant, and the people of one Arab country have served as a role-model for another, such certainly could be seen in the case of Tunisia and Egypt and Libya.

3. THE INFLUENCE OF THE WEST IN THE ARAB WORLD

Tracing the history of colonialism, just like several developing nations, the Middle East remained a region that never fully gained its independence. Despite the region sitting on top of the bulk of the globe's oil reserves, the Arab world has been the target of continual interference and intervention ever since independent. Arabs remained carved into artificial states after WWI, it is been bombed and occupied by the US, Israel, Britain and France, and of course locked down with US bases and western backed tyrannies [11]. One of the fundamental reasons behind the progress of the Arab uprisings in Tunisia is that the revolutionists focused on corruption, poverty, and lack of freedom, rather than western domination or Israeli occupation. However, the fact that they kicked off against western backed dictatorships meant they posed a direct threat to the strategic order (the West). Since the day that Hosni Mubarak fell in Egypt, the western powers and their Gulf allies have been working tirelessly to counter-drive, to buy off, crush, or hijack the Arab revolutions, and they have got a deep well of experience to draw on: every centre of the Arab uprisings, from Egypt to Yemen, has lived through decades of imperial domination. All the main NATO states that bombed Libya in particular the US, Britain, France and Italy have had troops occupying the country well within living memory [6].

Although in the 1950s, Arab states dropped out of the Western orbit, followed by the July 1958 radical Iraqi nationalist army overthrow of a corrupt and repressive western backed regime garrisoned by British forces and the influence of Nasser's pan-Arabism. In February 1963, US and British intelligence backed the bloody coup that first brought Saddam Hussein's Ba'athists to power. More so, a third of the population of Libya died under the atrocity of Italian colonial rule, the heroic Libyan resistance movement led by Omar Mukhtar was crossed and hanged in an Italian concentration camp. South Yemeni liberation movements forced British troops to evacuate the last outpost of empire after they had beaten, tortured and murdered their way through Aden's Crater district [7].

One of the fundamental factors that destabilised the Middle East peace and progress before and during the uprising is the intensified violence between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq as US. Differences among various strains of Islam complicated the crackdown on mainly Shiite protesters in Bahrain, and played a role in the crisis in Syria. It was principally propelled by President Bashar al-Assad's desperate efforts to remain in power. Sunni-Shiite rivalry also presents a serious threat to political stability in Lebanon, while in Egypt, anti-Christian sentiment flared into violence, with notable help from the military [2].

The West's response to the Arab Spring is riddled with interests and values. On the one hand, the West finds itself sympathising with those who demand an end to authoritarian and arbitrary rule, popular representation, rule of law, social justice, and an end to corruption. Indeed, these are all what Western democracy envisages and sought to have been practised as a core model of organising public life. On the other hand, Western countries, most notably the United States, are wary of the potential outcome of the revolutionary wave that is shaking the Arab world, since it might evolve into a system of regional relations less compatible with Western preferences than the pre-2011 environment [13]. The striking divide between the West's mind hinges on the simple and irrefutable fact that both the United States and Europe have for decades often actively supported Arab authoritarian regimes in return for western-friendly policies. The most considerable factors are the security of energy supplies, non-confrontational relations with Israel, the keeping at bay Islam-rooted political movements and, more recently, cooperation in the fight against Jihad inspired terrorism as well as irregular migration. Western support for countries like Syria, Iraq and Libya were not done for the nature of their regimes, but for the anti-Western policies they pursued. For instance, when Libya's rebellion broke out, the West was actually in full conciliatory mode towards Qaddafi because of his 2003 decision to give up Libya's weapons of mass destruction programme [8].

Notwithstanding, the issue of Libya was a special case, unwise leadership managed to isolate the country from the Middle East context, consequently making revolutionary changes in Libya itself less relevant to regional balances. As a result, the West pursues a regime change policy without much prejudice to its perceived interests in the Middle East, as well as for a relatively easy re-alignment of the West's interests. If the West has reasonable expectations that Libya's new leaders will establish a more pluralistic government and embrace a policy of cooperation, things stand differently as far as other countries are concerned ([8]).

One of the main focuses on Western influence is Egypt. Arguably Egypt is the most critical of all Arab countries due to its demographic size and position in the region. Egypt is the most populous Arab nation, and more than twice as large as the second largest Arab country, Algeria. Its prominent position in the Arab League and mediation role between Israel and the Palestinians are other considerable factors. At the beginning of the uprisings, the West and particularly the United States hesitated for what many thought was too long before throwing its weight behind the anti-Mubarak street protests in Cairo and other Egyptian cities, due to the fact that for the past 30 years Mubarak closely followed a US-friendly policy in return for political backing and massive financial aid, such as the military at the cost of alienating a public opinion widely suspicious of US influence in the region [12]. However, the fear of being associated with authoritarian regime and that the country could plunge into chaos, or that a revolutionary, unfriendly government might be established in Cairo, Americans and Europeans pushed for a closely managed or, as US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it, 'orderly' transition to a new, more plural, government in Egypt. US felt comfortable because the military, with whom it has its closest links, established itself as the manager and guarantor of the transition [8].

In comparison with Tunisia where the uprising began, the first reactions to the protests by western countries were first muted to see the direction of where the demonstration is heading. The only exception is the unfortunate case of then French foreign minister Michèle Alliot-Marie, who first offered assistance to Tunisian riot police to quell the revolt. The United States and other EU member states rapidly changed tack and expressed support for the demonstrators' demands, their initial hesitations reinforced the perception that the West was clinging to its stability-first policy even in the face of pro-democracy protests. The fact that the West did little to prevent the Saudi-led repression of anti-government demonstrators in Bahrain, and that it adopted a rather cautious approach towards the turmoil in Yemen, seemed to confirm that Western countries were only grudgingly coming to terms with the possibility that the Middle East was on the verge of a revolutionary change [14]. The French and British push for military action against Qaddafi, the least defensible of all Arab autocrats, was widely believed to be partly motivated by the wish to alter these perceptions by showing concrete solidarity with Arab anti-authoritarian movements [8].

The Western influences in the Arab world gains unpopular support from the masses, in particular the Palestinian problem which remains one of the most important concerns. Western policies over the past century have greatly contributed to the state of affairs in the Arab region today. As Arab and pan-Arab nationalists have not been able to rid Arab societies of the Western-supported dictators, it became only natural for many in the Arab and Muslim world to turn to political Islamic movements and parties for salvation. While it is true that Islam as a religion and a culture is intrinsic to Arab life, the politicisation of Islam is a product of internal and external developments. The support rendered by the West of corrupt regimes and its concerted attack on nationalist and pan-nationalist secular forces have made the rise of political Islam almost inevitable. At the same time, by no means are all those who vote for Islamist parties in Arab elections actually casting votes of protest against Western policies and attitudes. For instance, in the legislative election that ensured Hamas mandate in the Palestine in 2006, the majority of Palestinians, including Christians voted for Hamas to send a message to the West that no pressure tactics or cutting off foreign aid can dictate their decision at the ballot box. It is interesting that during attempts to curtail the rise of political Islam, such as Sudan, Palestine and Algeria, the West seems to have reconciled some of its policies with the assumption that this phenomenon is here to stay. It has concluded that these forces can serve to counteract radical Islam, as represented by Al-Qaeda. Regardless of numerous propagandas been propagated to blackmail Islam, nonetheless official Western expressions have accepted the results of recent Arab elections. The Western new directions towards the Muslim world, as underscored in President Barak Obama's address at Cairo University a couple of years ago, raised the eyebrows of many secularists and nationalists in the Arab region. President Obama described the type of new relations he proposed for the United States and Arab World:

"I've come here to Cairo to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based on mutual interest and mutual respect, and one based upon the truth that America and Islam are not exclusive and need not be in competition. Instead, they overlap, and share common principles - principles of justice and progress; tolerance and the dignity of all human beings" [9].

At that period, people divided in their view; one doubts whether such new proposal can become true or just a mere statement, while another view hopes for change. But the role of United States during the Arab Uprisings raise question whether the West plans to play Muslim groups against each other, in order to further weaken and divide the Arab world or not?

4. THE RESULT OF THE UPRISING

The Arab uprising commenced in 2011 through the platform of revolutions, began in Tunisia after the wave of protests to discover their common yearning for dignity and liberty. The mostly non-violent removal of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali from office in Tunisia led to subsequent democratic elections that brought the Islamist party Ennahda to power in 2011. Viewing it on a democratic aspect, Tunisian politics saw the Islamist party departing from their tradition through the Tunisia's liberal and secular opposition resisted push for a religious state and grudgingly accept a secular civil state. Along the way, Tunisia adopted one of the most liberal constitutions in the entire Arab world. The centre-left President Moncef Marzouki said: "With the birth of this text ...we confirm our victory over dictatorship". Can this optimistic impression be seen elsewhere in the Arab world? [3].

Egyptians dumped Hosni Mubarak, and the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate won Egypt's presidential election with 51% of the vote that installed Mohamed Morsi the first opposition president. Unlike the Tunisians, a substantial majority of Egyptians went for Islamists of one stripe or another. Exactly one year in office Morsi was removed by the military, General Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi and immediately declared war against the Muslim Brotherhood. Millions of Egyptians celebrated Sisi's coup as a revolutionary correction. That scenario shows that Egypt went back to square one where it started. The Muslim Brotherhood has been outlawed all over again, while the new regime and its supporters are no more liberal and democratic than the Mubarak period. For instance, in March 2014, more than 500 Muslim Brotherhood officials were sentenced to death in one swoop, although majority of them were commuted to life, it again sentenced another six hundred.

In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi's regime was brought to an end by a six-month uprising and a subsequent civil war saw the US and NATO partners carrying out airstrikes against the Gaddafi regime of 42 years. Since his death, Libya has been a country without a central governing authority. Despite that several warring factions claimed being the legitimate rulers of Libya; the parliament is based in Tobruk, while dozen of rivals control the capital Tripoli [7].

The blooming of the Arab Spring has created more effectively than any other factor; it led Palestinian political groups to reconcile differences, given the absence and weakening of Arab rulers who played one force against another. Previously Mubarak embraced Abbas of the Palestinian Authority, while Assad hosted Hamas. Internationally, the image of submissive and disorganised Arabs was replaced with revolutionary and highly disciplined citizens: certainly the revolution in Egypt was a clear testimony to the ability of massive crowds to act as one body, despite rampant poverty and high unemployment. Regardless of the level of success or failure, the outcome of the events was the overthrow of Mubarak, Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Libya's Mu'ammarr al- Qadhafi; successful elections in Tunisia; and democratic ferment throughout the Arab world. As a result, it is recorded in history that governments and rulers who mistreated their people for years met themselves on the defensive side. It is also a clear indication of dominant trends between when authoritarian powers repressed domestic critics and dismissed mild objections from the democratic world with brazen contempt [2].

Yet it is Tunisia that has emerged as the most dramatic success story thus far in the series of popular uprisings that took place across the Arab world during 2011. It has been transformed from a showcase for Arab autocracy to an electoral democracy whose new leaders have pledged themselves to moderation, adherence to civil liberties, and the rule of law. The press is critical and vibrant; there are practically no taboo subjects. Civil society has proliferated, and elements within the new leadership appear committed to tackling the problem of pervasive corruption, though achieving such deep institutional reforms will likely require many years of effort. Some gains were also made in Egypt and Libya, but in both of these societies, the future prospects for democratic reform are still very much in doubt. In Egypt, the governing authority shifted from the Mubarak regime to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), a group of military leaders who have dispensed justice through military tribunals, engaged in periodic crackdowns on critical media, raided the offices of civil society organisations, and mistreated women [10].

5. POLITICAL FUTURE OF ARAB SOCIETIES

Although it remains in doubt whether the events of 2011 will lead to a true wave of democratic revolution or not, Tunisia was clearly the greatest beneficiary of the revolutionary changes. Although, much remains to be done, and there are some questions about the positions of the new leaders on certain crucial issues such as; minority rights, freedom of belief, and freedom of expression. Egypt also made significant gains, but they have been overshadowed in many respects by the continued political dominance of the military, its hostility towards media critics, its campaign against human rights organisations, and its discrimination and humiliation treatment of female protesters. Ironically, in several Arab countries, democracy movements have yet to reach even the initial milestone of forcing the resignation of their long time rulers. The perceived success or failure of these efforts will either continue to inspire similar changes in the rest of the world, or bolster authoritarian calls for “stability” at any price. This is most likely in various developing countries, particularly, in Africa and Asia [6].

The Arab world is undergoing a process of massive transformation, necessitated by profound feelings of many years of humiliating national, regional and international injustices, western-supported corruption and subjugation. While predicting the future in a constantly dynamic region is futile, indications are that the desires of the people will eventually prevail. Egypt serves as an example for other Arab countries; at a time when some may have thought that the revolution was over with the removal of Mubarak, Egyptians loudly reminded the entire world that they were not about to accept an extension of the Mubarak regime through the Military Council, neither the Islamic brotherhood, or the situation that returned it back to the era of military dictatorship. Indeed, the pressure cooker has finally cracked. The Arab street has been, and will most likely remain, on alert. The transitional political Islamic forces themselves will also be held accountable. The road ahead is rife with internal and international challenges. Yet returning to the corrupt regimes of the past will prove more costly than carving the path of freedom. The Arab masses will not wait passively at the receiving end. In spite of many odds, they will insist on being makers of their own history. The brave commitment and struggle can lead to a proactive future result.

6. CONCLUSION

One will consider the Arab Spring a failure only if one expected that decades of authoritarian regimes could be easily reversed and replaced with stable democratic systems across the region in a very short period of time. Similarly, it is a disappointment to those hoping that the removal of corrupt rulers would translate into an instant improvement in living standards, while chronic instability in countries undergoing political transitions has put additional strain on struggling local economies, and deep divisions have emerged between the Islamists and secular Arabs.

It is more useful to define the 2011 uprisings as a catalyst for long-term change whose final outcome is yet to be seen. The main legacy of the Arab Spring is in smashing the myth of Arabs’ political passivity and the perceived invincibility of arrogant ruling elites. Even in countries that avoided mass unrest, the governments take the quiescence of the people at their own peril. Although predicting the future in a constantly dynamic region may be futile, indications are that the desires of the people will eventually prevail. In spite of many odds, they will insist on being makers of their own history [1].

The role of the democracies in Europe and across the Atlantic during this period of upheaval has been controversial to say the least. First they staged a NATO airstrike intervention against the Gaddafi regime in Libya and then left the country to itself in the aftermath. At the same time, Western politicians willingly closed both eyes to the Gulf States’ intervention against peaceful protesters in Bahrain. Even though, the international power praised change in Tunisia, but they slow to recognise and support the democratic protest in other Gulf nations such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, some scholars suggested that this could be due to the fact that instability in the gulf could usher in a period of unrest in the markets which could boost the price of oil [14].

In Syria, the West kept watching one of the most dreadful crimes against humanity since Rwanda from the side-lines but intervened against the Islamist fundamentalists of ISIL because they were, and still are, perceived a threat to international security, while Assad only constitutes a threat to Syrians. By inviting the new military of Egypt to Europe’s capitals to sign arms deals while the Mubarak regime was absolved of all sins and the protesters whom the West applauded in 2011 are jailed and sentenced to death in mass lawsuits. Applauding the King in Morocco for his stable path towards democracy while he cracks down on protesters, critical artists, and journalists just after the mass protests stopped. It

shows that the West remains intact with the same direction envisaged far before the uprisings. The current situation in Yemen is also questionable, while the West hides behind Arab led military operations in what was termed the threat of extremism.

The old idea that democracy could not take hold in the Middle East has been challenged, it is clear that the Arab people wanted to seize the golden chance they had in 2011 to change the game from a dictator to at least a leader that listens to their demand. No matter what, as the development in the Arab region remains in progress, the certainty of the result of the uprisings is yet to be seen. The expected quick result will also heavily depend on the West's willingness to work for the interest of the Arab communities rather than certain individuals.

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