Democratisation: uprising, violence and reform.

Book section

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

DEMOCRATISATION: UPRISING, VIOLENCE AND REFORM

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2011 has been a year of tremendous, unprecedented popular mobilisation in the Arab Middle East. Developments are on-going and the future is open-ended and uncertain. Nevertheless, we can already discern how the uprisings are beginning to transform the political landscape and, in particular, how they may affect the prospects for democratisation in the Arab world.

Each one of the 2011 Arab uprisings must be treated on its own merits but, for the purposes of exploring the prospects for democratisation, we can divide them into three broad types or categories. In the first, mass civic revolts led to the peaceful overthrow of powerful dictators; this was the case of Tunisia's Zine el Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. In the second category, uprisings led to internal fracture, violence and even civil war. In the case of Libya, revolt invited foreign military intervention and ultimately led to the overthrow of Muammar Gadhafi. In Bahrain, the uprising was brutally suppressed. In Yemen, there has been political confrontation and a simmering crisis. In Syria a popular revolt is continuing but the regime is attempting to suppress it. The third category comprises Arab states which did not experience major upheavals. The partial exceptions are Morocco and Jordan where ruling monarchs, faced with a degree of popular challenge, tried to forestall an even bigger one by offering political concessions.

The reasons behind the uprisings and the factors which determined their success or failure are closely linked to making judgements about political change.

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An explosive mix of socio-economic and political grievances lay behind all the uprisings. Poverty is not in itself an explanation – Libya and Tunisia where rebellions occurred are relatively better off than other Arab states – although the successful provision of economic benefits inoculated some regimes from trouble (for instance in the Arab Gulf states).

At the heart of the matter are relative deprivation, a fall of standards, and a clash between expectations and reality. Youth unemployment, corruption and dropping living standards intensified in the years of economic crisis following 2008. It would be a mistake, however, to see the uprisings as being driven primarily by economic grievances. Socio-economic and political discontent are impossible to disentangle but the demands articulated by the uprisings appear to be of the latter kind – if not democracy at least for 'dignity' and 'freedom'.

The articulation of these political demands during the uprisings will be an important driving force for the future. Another issue, which will be relevant to the region's prospects for democratisation, is the extent to which popular mobilisation was the achievement of pre-existing civil society and political opposition groups. Prior to 2011, there was a consensus that these were weak and unable to challenge authoritarian structures throughout the Arab world. It may be that, in some cases, this judgement was wrong; in Tunisia, for instance, the country's main trade union (UGTT) was instrumental in organising the demonstrations which overthrew Ben Ali. But in Egypt it seems (to this researcher at least) that, although civil society and opposition groups did play a role in the uprising, they were not the primary movers of a largely spontaneous event. The lack of strong pre-existing opposition structures in the case of Egypt, and even more so in other places such as Libya, will make it difficult to channel the popular uprisings into institutionalised political groups and institutions.

Accounting for the success or failure of the uprisings, where they occurred, requires us to look at two other factors (which will also influence the prospects for democratisation in each given case). The first is the degree to which regimes were able to retain the support of key institutions, most notably the army. In the case of Tunisia and Egypt the army moved against the presidents. In Syria, Bahrain and Yemen it did not, and the regimes have not fallen, at least for now. In the case of Libya it took foreign intervention to achieve the ousting of the dictator. The second factor is the degree to which regimes were able to retain support of significant social groups. In Tunisia and Egypt they were not able to do so. In the cases of Libya, Syria and Bahrain and Yemen they did and, as a result, the revolts lacked the all-engulfing nature of the Tunisian and Egyptian events.

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The above analysis of the uprisings' causes and consequences helps us to think about prospects for the future and demonstrates that there will be no uniform outcome with regards to democratisation. The first category is the most hopeful. In Tunisia the combination of long-standing state institutions, a historically vibrant civil society and political class (which Ben Ali did not manage to eradicate) and widespread consensus in seeking the ouster of the dictator, render its prospects excellent. In Egypt the worst excesses of the previous regime will be reduced, and there will be improvement in the protection of civil and political rights, but the continuing dominance of the army and the enduring strength of the political and socio-economic establishment mean that change will be limited.

Prospects are not good for societies in the second category. In Libya, the overthrow of Gadhafi's regime will almost certainly not have happened without foreign intervention; moreover, Libya's weak state institutions and civil society do not readily lend themselves to democratisation. In Yemen, regime change may mean state collapse; in Bahrain suppression of the movement has put an end to hopes for a democratic opening in the short to medium term; and Syria is in the throes of civil war. In our third set of cases, change will be superficial. In Morocco and Jordan constitutional amendments will perhaps permit a greater degree of political contestation but Kings Mohammed and Abdullah respectively have not allowed their powers to be restricted.

The role Islamist movements will play in these processes is an important consideration. However diverse they were, one generalisation can be made about the uprisings: None were led by Islamist movements and in none of them was an Islamic state a primary demand. Nevertheless, the uprisings will affect the Islamists' position. In cases of on-going violent conflict, as in Syria and in Libya, more extreme versions of Islamism, alongside secular extremist movements, may come to the fore. In Morocco and Jordan, mainstream Islamists will not deviate greatly from their stance of being 'loyal oppositions'.

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The most interesting developments will occur in Tunisia and Egypt, where Islamists are taking part in emerging political processes. Overall, they may benefit from the opening up of political systems and their support will increase. However, they will not achieve electoral majorities. In the long run, they will lose out politically because they will fail to deliver concrete ideological alternatives to their citizenry, concentrating (as they do) on moral and social issues. The experience of Iran, where a purportedly 'Islamic' system has in fact failed to deliver the goods to its population and has become profoundly unpopular with its own people, will be replicated in those parts of the Arab world where Islamist movements engage in political processes or achieve power.

Looking ahead through a policy lens, the emergence of stable democracies in the Arab region, where they occur, may or may not give rise to pro-Western regimes or at the very least solid and reliable interlocutors for Western governments. In the short term, the uprisings are causing instability. This is a price worth paying if it leads to some positive developments in future. In any case there is nothing that Western governments can do to prevent it (just as they played no role in causing or shaping the course of the uprisings, with the exception of Libya), even though the democracy promotion bureaucratic machines are already being put in motion to help out with democratic 'transitions'.