

Has the Arab Spring Produced a Chasm between the Revolutionary and Status Quo Countries in the Arab World?

While some experts predicted that the Arab rebellions of spring 2011 (and beyond) would widen the strategic, political, and even ideological gap between Arab states undergoing dramatic change and those defending the status quo, in fact, no such clear breach has occurred. Instead, Dawisha argues that economic crisis, escalating Shi'i-Sunni tensions, and the associated realpolitik concerns of the Western powers have dampened the potentially incendiary demonstration effect of Arab political revolts on the course of both domestic political change and regional politics.

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Historically, revolutions have not been confined to their own bounded universe. Over the last hundred years, revolutions in Russia, China, Egypt, Cuba, Vietnam, and Iran have all had political and security impacts on the regions in which they are geographically situated and beyond. And so will the Arab revolutions that began in Tunisia in December 2010 and spread to other Arab countries in the following months. The question is how significant and profound will the impact of the Arab Spring's revolutionary eruptions be on the region? And will they lead to a political and geo-strategic chasm between the revolutionary and status quo states?

On one level, the impact of these revolutions has already been felt. They have already contributed to perceptible changes in a number of countries. In Morocco, by the summer of 2011, King Mohammed VI had revised the constitution, in which he transferred some of his powers to parliament. Significantly, he no longer had the prerogative to select his prime minister and members of the cabinet. Now the king would appoint a prime minister from the party that wins the election, and the prime minister would then propose candidates for governmental ministries and submit their names to the king for approval. According to one analyst, "the king may not have abandoned all his powers, but he seems to have curtailed a significant part of them."¹ And, indeed, in the aftermath of parliamentary elections in November 2011, King Mohammed VI invited the leader of the Islamist Justice and Development Party to form a government.

Another king also responded to the pressures of the Arab Spring. In Jordan, as demonstrations erupted in Amman, Irbid, and other cities in March 2011, King Abdullah II quickly announced the formation of a 52-member committee of national dialogue, tasked with recommending political reforms to parliament. And, indeed, a year later, parliament passed a law for the establishment of an independent electoral commission to oversee and manage the parliamentary elections that would take place in January 2013. While the results fell far short of peoples' expectations—as allies of the king dominated the new parliament as they had done before—still, the election did reverse Jordan's track record of electoral fraud,² and it did produce a healthy turnout of some 57 percent.

Even in democracy's most inhospitable terrain, some change would occur. In a classic rentier state move, Saudi Arabia's initial knee-jerk response to the Arab Spring was to try to buy off the population. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia swiftly announced \$37 billion in pay raises, unemployment checks, and other benefits to the citizens of the kingdom.

¹ Ahmed Benchemsi, "Morocco: Outfoxing the Opposition," *Journal of Democracy*, January 2012, p.59.

² Danya Greenfield, "Optimism after Jordan's elections," *Foreign Policy*, January 23, 2013,

http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2013/01/25/optimism_after_jordans_election

But the absolutist monarch soon realized that was not enough. So in a move that surprised many, he announced that women would have the right to vote and run in the country's 2015 municipal elections. Fifteen months later, in January 2013, 30 women, all clad from head to toe in black, some wearing the forbidding *niqab*, took their seats as the first female members of the *Majlis al-Shura*, the kingdom's Consultative Council.

The main threat of the Arab Spring to other countries, therefore, was in the realm of ideas. Any reform undertaken by Arab kings was born out of fear of the idea of freedom, which of late had become far more incendiary and much more contaminating than in the past because of the extraordinary advances in the fields of communications and information technology—satellite television, the Internet, the rapid rise of social media, and the abundance of cell phones.

But ideas, on their own, may not be enough to subvert the stability of the status quo countries. There needs to be a positive “demonstration effect,”³ where, at some point, the potency of ideas will be measured in terms of their operational success. The seamlessness with which East European countries moved away from totalitarian communism and adopted democratic structures can be attributed in no small measure to the image of thriving West European democracies. If a regional chasm in the Middle East is to develop, this would happen if the Arab Spring countries were to achieve a semblance of democratic success, preferably fortified by palpable economic growth, thereby providing a positive demonstration effect that would either ignite democratic revolutions in the status quo countries or, at a minimum, force the recalcitrant authoritarian leaders of these countries to embark on a process of meaningful liberal reforms.

All indications so far are that leaders of the status quo countries can breathe easily—one is hard put to find even one revolutionary outcome that can be substantively characterized as a positive demonstration effect. The first casualty was the tiny Gulf state of Bahrain. There, the uprising by the Shi'a majority against the politically dominant Sunni minority was quickly throttled by King Al Khalifa with pivotal help from his neighbors, the Saudis, implacable guardians of the authoritarian vision. The Bahraini king portrayed the revolution as simply an Iranian-backed Shi'a sectarian uprising, and, while an independent commission of inquiry dismissed any Iranian involvement,⁴ the sectarian character of the uprising was hardly illusory.

In Libya and Yemen, two dictators who had ruled their countries for a number of decades were successfully deposed after considerable loss of life and many sacrifices, but the end result left much to be desired; tribal and regional loyalties have stymied political compromise, and, in both cases, emerging state institutions have not been able to exercise political control over armed and unruly groups. The newly elected president of Yemen, Abd Rabo Mansour al-Hadi, has presided over an economically failing and chaotic state,

³ This is a phrase used by Samuel P. Huntington in his *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p.100.

⁴ For a summary of the commission's report, see *BBC News*, November 23, 2011, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-15861353?print

where a chronically divided army is supposed to confront separatist forces in the north and in the south of the country, to say nothing of a potent al-Qaeda inspired religious insurrection. In Libya, the newly elected parliament and government have been paralyzed by heavily-armed militias representing the country's various regions, whose power dwarfs that of Libya's fledgling army. Max Weber's definition of the state as having a monopoly over the instruments of coercion hardly applies to contemporary Libya, where state institutions have been unable to function in the face of constant threats and harassment by the militias.

And then there is the tragic case of Syria, where a murderous regime, allergic to any notion of civil human behavior, turned a peaceful uprising into a bloody civil war that has inflicted untold atrocities on countless men, women, and children. More than 80,000 people have been killed, and over a million others find themselves in refugee camps in neighboring countries. Longstanding bustling cities now lie in ruin as they are mercilessly pounded from the ground and from the air. The pivotal Middle Eastern state that Syria once was now is being torn apart by a savage regime and an increasingly callous opposition.

In spite of all these cases of unfulfilled promise, the Arab Spring could at least boast of the political achievements associated with the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia. In both cases, free and fair elections were held, elected assemblies were formed and tasked with writing new constitutions, and ensuing governments emerged from the will of the people. While Tunisia will always be remembered as the birthplace of this new Arab awakening, it was the prospect of a democratic Egypt that would create the greatest fear among the autocrats of the status quo powers. For over a century, Egypt constituted the heart of the Arab world—its most populous, powerful, and culturally dominant country. When things happened in Egypt, other Arabs took notice. And to those Arabs hoping for democratic overspill, good things seemed to be happening in Egypt.

But the exhilaration felt by democrats inside and outside Egypt in the early days of the revolution was later tempered by the extraordinary spectacle of two Islamist parties, the mainstream Freedom and Justice Party (FJP) and the more hard line Salafist Nour Party winning the inaugural elections for a constituent assembly in early 2012. A few months later, the FJP's Mohamed Morsi was elected president.

Any concern felt by the leaders of the status quo powers must have dissipated by the early policies of Egypt's new Islamist rulers. Morsi himself seemed susceptible to authoritarian proclivities. Last November he surprised Egyptians by unilaterally decreeing new powers for himself, and in December he put a new and contentious constitution to a snap referendum, leaving no time for public debate.

Indeed, the whole episode of the writing of this constitution and its provisions revealed the absolute determination of Egypt's Islamists not to include in the conversation those who did not fully share their ideals. Almost all non-Islamist members left the constitution-writing committee, complaining that their opinions and objections were rejected with dependable regularity. That left the constitution in the hands of the

Islamists, who ended up producing a document that many human rights groups described as flawed. It basically gave al-Azhar, Egypt's center of Islamic learning, the right to intrude in the law-making process, and it excluded religions not belonging to the Abrahamic tradition from practicing their faith. Certain provisions could easily be used by Islamists to restrict the rights of women, and others would limit freedom of expression.⁵ There was no mistaking the heavy hands of Egypt's Islamists.

After many decades, harassed and hounded by a series of secular, nationalist dictatorships, the Islamists seem determined to stamp their political and cultural vision on Egypt. Fortified by their large electoral majority, they see little reason to compromise with non-Islamists. In current Islamist discourse, articulated by scores of spokesmen and devotees, the will of the people, democracy's most basic dictum, is translated into the will of the majority. Deep in their hearts, Egypt's Islamists have no time for secularists, and, to them, democracy seems valuable only in its ability to unlock the gates to political power. These are no die-hard democrats.

There is perhaps no better barometer of the democratic orientations of political groups than their attitudes and policies toward women. After their electoral victory in Egypt, the Islamists in the National Assembly bitterly attacked a number of laws passed during the Mubarak era that granted women the right to divorce and to keep custody of their children, allowed them to travel without the permission of their husbands, and gave them legal powers to contest discrimination through the office of an ombudsman. Most egregious was the Islamists' effort to reopen debate on female genital mutilation, a practice that had been criminalized in 2008 by the Mubarak regime. The Islamist representatives, including the paltry number of elected women, justified their hostility to these laws by arguing that these regulations undermined the sanctity of the family.⁶

The policies and ideational proclivities of Egypt's Islamists must have lain to rest the early dread among the status quo powers that Egypt would turn into the insurrectionist democratic 'other.' And the autocrats' fears were further allayed by Egypt's deteriorating economy under the new Islamist elites.

Foreign exchange reserves are rapidly falling, and despite constant governmental pleas, outsiders are not investing. In the two years since the revolution, the Egyptian pound lost 14 percent of its value. Unemployment, particularly among the young, is rampant, and inflation is rising. It is not uncommon to see demonstrators waving bread to signify the persistent wretchedness of their lives. More than a year after coming to power with promises to alleviate the economic woes of the people, all the Islamists can show is an economy that appears to be on the verge of an irretrievable downward spiral.

⁵ Zaid al-Ali, "The New Egyptian Constitution: An Initial Assessment of its Merits and Flaws," *Open Democracy*, December 26, 2012, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/zaid-al-ali/new-egyptian-constitution-initial-assessment-of-its-merits-and-flaws>

⁶ Adeer Dawisha, *The Second Arab Awakening: Revolution, Democracy and the Islamist Challenge from Tunis to Damascus* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p.251.

Indeed, the only reason the country's economy has survived is because of the generosity of the status quo powers. Egypt's Islamists have directed a number of panicky appeals to the status quo countries for urgent financial help, and generally the response has been positive. Since Morsi's election a year ago, Egypt has received \$8 billion from Qatar and is expecting \$2.5 billion from Saudi Arabia and \$4 billion from Iraq.⁷ This money is essential to keep Egypt's economy afloat, as its foreign currency reserves have dwindled from \$36 billion to \$13.5 billion over the last two years. With the country's economy so dependent on the likes of Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as Shi'i Iraq, the new Islamist rulers in Egypt, even had they been imbued with revolutionary fervor, are pretty unlikely to bite the hands that are feeding them.

It is interesting to note that Egypt's efforts to seek economic aid from regional powers constitute a palpable shift from its longstanding reliance on the United States and Western financial institutions. It has given the Morsi government breathing space, allowing it to keep in abeyance IMF loans with their usual conditions and restrictions that tend to have destabilizing social costs. Beyond the economic domain, Morsi and his Islamist government were also making a political statement—a reminder to America and the West that Egypt is not without options.

Indeed, some of these options may not be all that palatable to Washington. Morsi's attendance of the Non-Aligned Conference in Tehran in August 2012 and his warm meeting with President Ahmadinejad in Cairo in February 2013 were meant not just to illustrate Egypt's independence, as well as its weight and station among third world countries, but also to send a message that Egypt can leverage regional security issues to its own advantage in its relations with Washington. This tactic, by the way, has been utilized periodically by the Arab status quo powers in their relations with Washington. Thus, Egypt's move is not that different from the Moroccan decision in April to cancel its annual military exercise with the United States after the Obama administration called for human rights monitoring in the disputed territory of Western Sahara. Nor is it that different from Jordan's efforts to stem criticisms of its anemic political reforms by invoking the country's 'delicate' security situation vis-à-vis the Israelis and Palestinians, or more recently in regard to Syria, the refugee problem and the Islamist influence.

Of course, such tactical policy convergence between 'revolutionary' and 'status quo' powers does not necessarily imply that these states follow the same, or even similar, long-term strategic goals. There can be little doubt that ideologically and intellectually, Egypt's Islamist leaders are much less tied than the kings of Morocco, Jordan, and the Gulf to the strategic interests of the United States and the West generally. Morsi's overtures to Tehran constituted a calculated gesture of independence (even defiance) which he had to know would create discomfort in Washington. And, indeed, the Obama

⁷ "Qatar, Libya give Egypt \$5 bln boost amid IMF talks," Reuters, April 10, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/04/10/egypt-imf-idUSL5N0CX0VG20130410>; "Egypt seeks \$4 bn bank deposit from Iraq," *Ahram Online*, March 25, 2013, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/news/67707.aspx>; "Egypt trying to woo nations for much-needed financial aid," *Al-Bawaba*, April 1, 2013, <http://www.albawaba.com/business/egypt-financial-aid-481304>

administration has to calculate that this is not simply a periodic and, more often than not, inconsequential policy maneuver.

Not that there is any need for Washington (or for that matter, Riyadh, Doha, or Bahrain) to hit the panic button. An Egyptian-Iranian axis is as unlikely today or in the future as it had been throughout the Mubarak years. If anything, it is far more unlikely under a Sunni Islamist political order. The much heralded meetings in Tehran and Cairo ended up producing one meager policy outcome—a bilateral deal opening Egypt to Iranian tourists. Yet howls of protest from the Salafists, and from within Morsi’s own Freedom and Justice Party, met the announcement, with one of the president’s closest advisors denouncing Iranian tourism in Egypt as “an infiltration of Iranian money and interests in the service of their goal of eliminating the Sunni sect from Egypt.”⁸ Extraordinarily hyperbolic as this statement undoubtedly is, it in fact did reflect popular Islamist (and general) sentiment in Egypt.⁹ Consequently, after a trickle of Iranians arrived in Egypt and were immediately ushered to the sites of Upper Egypt, the government gave in and halted all tourist flights. If Morsi’s intention in his overtures to Iran was to gain strategic advantage vis-à-vis the United States, and indeed the regional powers, then the effort thus far has failed.

If there was any fear that the events of the spring of 2011 would tilt the strategic balance in the direction of the revolutionary states—thereby creating a chasm between the status quo powers and the countries of the Arab Spring, which would result in a redistribution of regional power or, worse, lead to regional instability and conflicts—that concern must have subsided considerably by the spring of 2013. So far, political outcomes among the countries that experienced revolutionary upheavals can hardly be said to have provided an incendiary demonstration effect. Additionally, the economic structures of these countries are either non-existent or dependent for survival on the largess provided by fiercely status quo powers such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Finally, the distaste and fear of Shi’ism undermines the possibility of a potent anti-status quo, anti-Western alliance. In light of all this, *plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose* is an apt description of the political and geo-strategic situation in today’s Arab world.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

⁸ “Pious Politics: President Morsi’s efforts to befriend Iran upset his other allies,” *The Economist*, May 4, 2013, p. 52.

⁹ “A Global ‘No’ To a Nuclear-Armed Iran,” Pew Research Global Attitudes Project, May 18, 2013, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2012/05/18/a-global-no-to-a-nuclear-armed-iran/>

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