

“This is a period laden with potential for the growth of freedom, but also heavy with risks and challenges for the United States.”

# Arab Revolts Upend Old Assumptions

AUGUSTUS RICHARD NORTON

For decades US policy in the Arab world has shown a preference for stability over the uncertainty of political reform. Presidents or secretaries of state may have issued pro forma statements commending democracy as a form of government, but behind closed doors they characterized the Middle East as not conducive to democracy. Seasoned diplomats, such

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as the late Ambassador Hermann F. Eilts, were incredulous at the suggestion that democracy might find a home in Arab countries. Martin Indyk, who played the leading role in guiding the Middle East policy of the Bill Clinton administration, opposed the promotion of Arab democracy because in his view it undermined American and Israeli interests.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, mainstream views began to change since Middle Eastern dictatorships were now seen as contributing to extremism. The administration of George W. Bush did flirt with promoting electoral democracy, but the air went out of his “freedom agenda” after the Islamist movement Hamas won Palestinian elections in January 2006. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice often espoused “transformational democracy,” but US-orchestrated efforts to isolate and even topple Hamas led Middle Easterners to dismiss Rice’s assertions as hypocritical.

In a June 4, 2009, speech that roused excitement and momentary optimism in the Arab world, President Barack Obama embraced democracy and expressed his commitment “to governments that reflect the will of the people.” Obama said:

Each nation gives life to this principle in its own way, grounded in the traditions of its own people. America does not presume to know what is best for everyone, just as we would not presume to pick the outcome of a peaceful election. But I do have an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent and doesn’t steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. Those are not just American ideas, they are human rights, and that is why we will support them everywhere.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke vehemently in Dubai in early January 2011, just as large popular demonstrations were erupting in Tunisia. She warned that the Middle East was “sinking into the sand” and counseled political reforms and related remedies. But notwithstanding the Obama administration’s rhetoric, US policy continued to adhere to conventional wisdom about the low likelihood of popular rebellion.

## BIG SURPRISE

It had become commonplace for scholars and policy experts to express cynicism about the chances for democratic reform, the emergence of a vibrant civil society in the Arab world, or the significance of secular opposition voices. The prevailing perspective on prospects for Arab democracy was captured in a widely cited Brookings Institution monograph written in 2007 by Steven Heydemann. He argued that the Arab regimes had adopted sophisticated techniques of “authoritarian upgrading” to dampen domestic demands for reform. These techniques included a combination of limited political reforms, middle class co-optation, patronage, surveillance, and coercion.

Another respected scholar, Brandeis University’s Eva Bellin, offered a conceptually rigorous account showing how autocratic regimes in

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Arab countries had co-opted the educated middle classes. She emphasized the coercive apparatus available to governments and the prevalence of patrimonial leadership in the Middle East. She did not see much prospect for major political demonstrations. She said the region was characterized by a “low level of popular mobilization for political reform.”

Once the momentous events of 2011 were under way, some leading scholars issued mea culpas. The University of Vermont’s F. Gregory Gause III, writing in *Foreign Affairs*, admitted his own blindness to the emerging social forces in the region. He noted that many academic experts had gotten it wrong by succumbing to groupthink about the durability of authoritarian regimes.

In fact, some experts understood how vulnerable the Arab regimes were and how deeply Arab societies were penetrated by rage, but these scholars tended to be on the margins of the policy world, and few were frequent inside-the-beltway consultants. Scholars who got it right included Asef Bayat, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, who anticipated the potency of popular demonstrations in a number of his writings, and Stanford University’s Joel Beinin, who was alert to spreading labor unrest and strikes that the Egyptian government proved helpless to stop.

The Egyptian sociologist Saad Eddin Ibrahim also understood the popular contempt for ruling elites and courageously demanded reform (suffering two dreadful terms of imprisonment as a result). In addition, a few senior government analysts briefed the Bush administration on the deep-seated grievances in Arab countries, including Egypt, and judged that once a tipping point was reached, regimes would face serious instability in their societies.

## DAYS OF RAGE

Popular discontent exploded first in Tunisia in December 2010, as tens of thousands, inspired by the self-immolation of a street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, turned out to demand the fall of the regime. Once President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali fled the country on January 14, demonstrations gathered momentum in scores of towns and cities across the Middle East. Many of these protests were called “Days of Rage,” copying the Tunisian model.

The rage has been pent up for decades. It stems not just from government neglect and dishonesty, but also from the fact that most Arab governments treated their subjects and citizens with disdain. The vanguard of the demonstrators was youth in quest of dignity, hungry for jobs, and fed up with corruption.

As protests quickly grew in size and decibels, phrases such as “*irhal, irhal*” (leave/scram) and “the people want the fall of the regime” became common chants, echoing across the Arab world. The protesters often met violence and death, but the unprecedented scale of the rallies overwhelmed security forces that were accustomed to coping with demonstrations of dozens or hundreds. One could not help but remember a moment from the last days of the communist regimes in Europe during 1989. The East German leader Erich Honecker ordered his interior minister to respond to protests with an iron fist. Erich Mielke replied, “Erich, we can’t beat up hundreds of thousands of people.”

The role of the website WikiLeaks—much discussed in the Arab media—also has to be acknowledged as a contributing factor. Leaked US diplomatic cables highlighted egregious corruption, corroborating popular complaints. For instance, a December 2009 report by a US economic officer in Rabat, Morocco, repeated charges that the royal palace was being used to solicit bribes for allowing real estate deals. Perhaps most famously, several leaked cables detailed the corruption of Tunisian President Ben Ali’s in-laws, who lived in garish villas, surrounded by luxury.

In Tunisia and across the Arab world, the social contract between regimes and people promised economic well-being and public services in return for limited freedom and the muting of political voices. But as populations have burgeoned and large slices of national wealth have fallen into private hands, regimes have been unable to fulfill their side of the bargain.

Complaints about greed and malfeasance that for many years were only whispered are now fully aired. Cell phones, satellite television stations, and the internet have allowed people, especially the younger generation, to learn that many others share their rage. Through millions of dashed-off text messages, tweets, and Face-

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book posts, restrictions on free speech and assembly have been deftly skirted. Yet the Arab upheaval has not been a Twitter or Facebook revolution—these are only tools. Nor is it simply an outpouring of economic grievances. At the epicenter of the uprisings has been a clamor for respect and dignity.

While Americans and other Westerners may cheer on the reformers, it bears remembering that the inspiration for rebellion appeared locally; notwithstanding attempts by the United States to promote reform and democracy, notably during the Bush administration, the impetus for the upheavals of 2011 was purely indigenous. Former Vice President Dick Cheney has suggested that the “Arab Spring” was one of the “ripple effects” of America’s toppling of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. This is patently untrue. In the Arab world, the prevalent view of the Iraq War is very negative. Arabs are well aware of the massive civilian casualties and the chaos unleashed by the invasion. If anything, Iraq provided an example not to emulate but to avoid.

Indeed, one important aspect of the region’s recent demonstrations has been a persistent call for Arab governments to become independent of foreign influence. Dictators such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak were upbraided by protesters as “agents” of foreign powers, especially the United States and Israel.

## THE ISLAMIST MOMENT

The recent victories of the Justice and Development Party in Morocco and the Nahda Party in Tunisia signal a powerful resurgence of political Islam in post-autocratic societies. Likewise, results from Egypt suggest that the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party will lead a coalition government in Cairo when a complicated three-stage election concludes in January 2012.

These parties are not your grandfather’s Islamists. Views about human rights, toleration, and the legitimacy of democracy have evolved in encouraging directions in Islamic circles. Serious debate is taking place about earlier episodes of both failed and successful political change, including the army coup that thwarted an Islamist victory in Algeria nearly two decades ago; the failure of violent jihadist tactics, not least by

the widely despised Al Qaeda; and the exemplar of the moderate Islamic government elected in non-Arab Turkey, just to cite a few examples. Though some individuals radically dissent, the mainstream is politically pragmatic and fully capable of embracing the give and take of democratic life.

As the Arab revival surges on, it is likely that Islamically inspired groups will gain a major share of political power in Yemen and Syria, and even in Jordan and Bahrain. Despite Saudi Arabia’s strenuous efforts to stem the tides of change through influence and money, the pathology of authoritarian rule suggests continuing vulnerability to mass protest and resistance.

Arab electorates have enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to vote freely after decades of sham elections. But the challenges that will face popularly elected governments, especially job creation and other economic issues, are formidable. Chanting “Islam is the solution” will not overcome these challenges. Of course for winners of elections there will be a “night of honey,” as Arabs often call the wedding night, but real marital bliss will not ensue unless the victors solve problems. This means that new governments will often be obliged to embrace compromise and deal making, or face repudiation by an electorate that now knows how to institute political divorce.

## WHAT’S NEW

A year after the popular demonstrations began, a number of observations about them can be made. To begin with, the generation calling for change is generally youthful, inclusive, tolerant, and not beholden to regimes. The protests were not controlled or directed by Islamist radicals. Indeed, in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Bahrain, Islamist movements had to play catch-up with the revolts. Islamist leaders have quickly discerned that they represent only one of many voices in the movement for political reform. They realize that they must collaborate with emerging centers of power to help chart the future of their countries.

Imperiled Arab autocracies, meanwhile, are now in a rush to clean up their act. Whether the sitting governments survive or not, Western governments that for so long were willing to avert their eyes from human rights offenses will now find it

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more embarrassing to do so, and much more difficult to defend if they do.

At the same time, civil society in several Arab countries is producing new cadres of leaders—youthful, sophisticated, legitimate, inclusive, and nonideological. They want their societies to prosper and to join the modern world. This is what Obama talked about in Cairo in 2009.

It is clear that Arab publics are repudiating a strong executive—whether president or king—in favor of parliamentary democracies like those in Turkey and Indonesia. In presidential republics, the recent upheavals have signaled a desire to replace a powerful president with an independent prime minister and a parliament with legislative powers. Protesters have also demanded a civilian government, an end to the security state (*mukhabarat*), and constitutional reform. Even the military's privileged status is now being questioned, especially in Egypt, where the prerogatives of the generals had been off limits for debate, even in parliament.

Moving forward, American ties with Saudi Arabia and Israel mean that the United States is likely to continue pursuing checkered policies in the Middle East in spite of the Arab uprisings. On one

hand, the Saudi government represses many of its own people, not least the minority Shiite Muslim population that lives in the oil-rich Eastern Province. On the other hand the Saudis, who have broad financial investments in America, also have their hand on a spigot through which nine million barrels of oil flow daily.

While the United States and Saudi Arabia find common ground on the security front, the monarchy has been critical, even contemptuous, of the US decision to withdraw support from Mubarak in Egypt. In Bahrain, the Saudis moved decisively to thwart US reform efforts. Following a March 2011 intervention by the Saudis to support their satrap, King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, the change of tone in Washington about Bahraini reform was pitifully obvious. Therefore, even when the United States embraces significant reforms, it may find not only its foes but its allies working to sabotage its efforts.

The United States enjoys a singular relationship with Israel, and the Israelis watched 2011 unfold with dismay and apprehension. Key among Israeli concerns is the fate of its peace treaty with Egypt. If the Egyptian commitment to sustaining the treaty and the military coordination that accompanies

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it wanes, Israel will find that the keystone of its regional strategy is disappearing. This will have a massive impact on Israel's defense budget, the size of its army, and its economic health.

The Obama administration has urged Israel to understand that in a changing geopolitical context a resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict is imperative, but the hard-line Israeli government has rejected that counsel.

## TESTS FOR WASHINGTON

The past year's upheavals have marked a new epoch in the Arab world's politics, and many of the key changes will take years to play out. US policy toward the region will grow in complexity as newly empowered citizens gain a voice in their countries' political systems. What sorts of challenges will this new epoch present American policy makers?

First, it will be increasingly costly for the United States to maintain cozy relations with governments that rule through repression.

Second, public opinion in the Arab world was never as inconsequential as Washington policy-insiders often claimed, but in the new epoch of Arab politics kings, princes, presidents, and prime ministers will be much more sensitive to public sentiment and therefore often less willing to fall in line with US policies.

Third, in key regional conflicts, especially the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, US efforts to shield oppressors from condemnation will feed anti-American impulses that will jeopardize relations with democratizing governments.

Fourth, free elections in the Arab world will necessarily bring Islamically oriented parties greater political power, whether in partnership with secular or nationalist parties, or alone. This has already occurred in Tunisia, Morocco, Egypt, and Libya, and is likely to happen in Yemen and Syria. These parties will be far less susceptible to American influence than the dictators they replaced.

Fifth, while leading Islamist parties have embraced pluralism, tolerance, and protection for minorities, whether they will live up to their promises remains to be seen. Moreover, the rising tide of puritanical Salafist groups, most notably in Egypt, suggests that inter-religious clashes may grow.

Sixth, the widespread underlying discontent in the Arab world stems in significant part from government failures to meet economic needs. Even in the places, such as Tunisia, where prospects for political transformation seem brightest, the pitfalls are massive. In Tunisia, 20 percent of the working-age population (750,000 people, of whom 25 percent are college graduates) is unemployed. Economic needs will be all the more urgent as new political institutions are put in place. This means that the United States and its regional and global allies must stand ready to provide support for development strategies that are likely to be short on resources and indigenous expertise.

The Arab world is in the midst of a transformation that may make parts of the Middle East almost unrecognizable in years to come. This is a period laden with potential for the growth of freedom, but also heavy with risks and challenges for the United States. ■