

Storms of the Arab Spring

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Spring is not the most pleasant season in the Arab countries. The first time I spent the month of May in the Middle East, I was stunned when the mild weather turned stifflingly hot and dusty, ruining a planned picnic under carob trees and leaving everyone with headaches and scratchy eyes. My Palestinian friends explained: “Ah, it’s the *khamseen*”—the dust storms that interrupt the sweetest of months in this region.

And just so have *khamseen*-like storms of violence and political/social polarization arrived as an unwelcome, but perhaps inevitable, turn in the Arab Spring. Egypt’s first freely elected president turned out to be a disastrously inept leader, opening the way for a coup that plunged the country into violence; amid a massive crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, there has been a diversion away from democracy and toward military rule with a thin veneer of civilian governance. Libya’s chaotic security situation has repeatedly threatened to overwhelm unsteady progress toward a constitution and elections. Yemenis wonder whether their negotiated transition will result in real reform or just perpetuate mechanisms of state capture. Assassinations and other violence by Salafist groups rock Tunisia’s promising but still fragile efforts to build a democratic order. Syria remains in a horrific category of its own, devoured by a regime determined to fight change and outside forces ready to pursue their interests to the last Syrian. The role played by outside actors, including the United States, Europe, and the Gulf Arab states, has been barely adequate in the better cases (Tunisia, Yemen, Libya), and deeply harmful and fractious in others (Syria, Egypt).

Although the processes of change in these countries are turning out to be even more difficult

and violent than anticipated, it is worth looking back at the demands of the 2011 uprisings to see if any progress has been made. In Egypt, for example, the rallying cries were “*aysh, hurriya, adala ijtima’ia*”: bread, freedom, and social justice. Another frequent demand in several Arab Spring countries was “*karama*,” dignity. What the revolts all boiled down to was a call for a different relationship between citizen and government: a rejection of corrupt, repressive regimes that treated citizens as subjects without rights, paired with outrage at the capture of most economic benefits by government officials and their cronies.

HALTING PROGRESS

Among the 2011 demands, perhaps the most progress has been made on freedom (political freedom, as well as freedoms of expression and association), though the gains are uneven and still subject to challenge and reversal. To a surprising extent, elections have been free and fairly run, albeit far from sterling. It has also become clear that building consensus on political processes, or failing to do so, has made a profound difference. Tunisia took some months to hold a dialogue among political and social forces to build agreement on a transition roadmap, and it elected an interim legislative body and temporary officials before writing a new constitution. Notably, Tunisia has fared far better than Egypt, which rushed headlong into elections for permanent bodies without taking the rewriting of rules of the game seriously.

There have been many gains for free media and civil society in Libya, Tunisia, and Yemen. But again Egypt, where those sectors were relatively vigorous before the 2011 revolution, remains an outlier—media and civil society have faced a tough and uncertain environment there, enduring restrictive new laws and other forms of state harassment.

Dignity and social justice can be understood variously in the Arab context as encompassing economic equity on one hand or rights and

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the rule of law on the other; in either case, they remain areas of limited progress and much controversy. On the positive side, constituencies long dormant, apathetic, or dominated by state elites—such as women, Christians, Salafists, and Berbers—have become much more active in pursuing their rights.

On the negative side, the renegotiation of constitutions and other laws has put all rights on the table, removing the limited protections that some of these groups (notably women and religious minorities) enjoyed under the old regimes and subjecting them to rough treatment. Serious human rights abuses such as torture still take place with depressing frequency. Perhaps the areas of least progress in this domain have been transitional justice and security sector reform; abuses of the recent or distant past remain mostly unaddressed, and coercive internal security forces are either largely unreformed (Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen) or still weak and contested (Libya).

The fewest gains of all have been made on the economic issues related to social justice and economic inequality. Ongoing political turmoil has made it impossible so far to sort out competing governmental priorities regarding social spending (subsidies, public sector salaries) versus fiscal responsibility. Violence, political unpredictability, lawsuits, and labor strikes have caused investors and tourists to flee, leading to a rise in already-high unemployment, particularly among youth. Youth unemployment is at least 30 percent in Tunisia, according to the International Monetary Fund, and is approximately 40 percent in Yemen, according to the World Bank.

With economic growth slowed to a crawl, discussion of fairer distribution of gains has been largely moot. Occasional infusions of cash from

Gulf states (and in Libya, oil revenues) have fueled massive populist spending but done little to stimulate real economic progress.

NO GOING BACK?

The question now is whether and when the Arab Spring countries can escape the current khamseen—a storm of distrust between secularists and Islamists, resurgence of antidemocratic old regime forces, Western preoccupation and indifference, and proxy battles among Gulf and other regional players—and advance to a phase of more serious and inclusive political bargaining.

Tunisian political forces, including the Islamist Ennahda Party, have proved more adept at compromise and deal-making than their counterparts in other Arab transition countries, perhaps

because the lack of a single dominant political force compels them to work together. In any case, only with such inclusive bargaining will Arab nations be able to proceed to the painstaking work of build-

ing the political institutions, legal instruments, and economic policies that will gradually pave the way toward providing the bread, freedom, dignity, and social justice that their citizens desire.

There are no shortcuts on this road, and the ultimate destination remains unknown for Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. But returning to the status quo ante of stability characterized by corrupt, coercive governments and apathetic citizens does not appear to be among the available options. Even in Egypt, wild swings in popular support from the military to the Muslim Brotherhood and back—as well as the surprising persistence of anti-coup demonstrations in the face of massive repression—suggest a political scene that will remain in turmoil and frustrate attempts to reconstruct the pre-2011 order. ■

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