

Revolts in the Middle East

Brenda
Shaffer

Abstract

This article examines the 2011 popular revolts that took place in a number of Middle East countries. It analyzes the developments and their implications for the establishment of democratic government in the Middle East.

This article makes six major points: One, while the revolts have succeeded to bring down a number of the regimes in the region and weaken others, they may not have similar success in building democratic government. Two, while internet social networks played an important role in mobilizing demonstrators these frameworks do not tend to build committed political movements and this will affect the prospects of these movements to sustain political activity. Three, external intervention and influence from outside the region did not have a significant role in the revolts. At the same time, intra-Arab activity, such as that of the Al-Jazeera television station played a role in developments. Four, while new regimes and ruling parties that may be elected following the revolts will possess greater public legitimacy than the previous ruling regimes, these new forces will confront the same economic problems as their predecessors and this will complicate the prospects of transitioning to democracy. Five, the revolts represent a weakening not only of the ruling regimes, but of many of the traditional opposition forces in the Middle East states as well. Sixth, as of May 2011, with the exception of Libya and Bahrain, the revolts spared the major oil and gas exporters of the region.

* Dr. Brenda Shaffer is a faculty member in the School of Political Sciences at the University of Haifa

The first half of 2011 witnessed a number of populist revolts in Middle East countries that will have profound meaning for the political, social and economic developments in the region. This article will examine the developments and the implications for the establishment of democratic government in the Middle East. This article makes six major points: One, while the revolts have succeeded to bring down a number of the regimes in the region and weaken others, they may not have similar success in building democratic government. At this stage, it seems that the populist forces that brought down the ruling regime have little institutional capacity or share common visions beyond opposition to the ruling regimes. Two, while internet social networks played an important role in mobilizing demonstrators these frameworks do not tend to build committed political movements and this will affect the prospects of these movements to sustain political activity. Three, external intervention and influence from outside the region did not have a significant role in the revolts. At the same time, intra-Arab activity, such as that of the Al-Jazeera television station played a role in developments. Four, while new regimes and ruling parties that may be elected following the revolts will possess greater public legitimacy than the

previous ruling regimes, these new forces will confront the same economic problems as their predecessors and this will complicate the prospects of transitioning to democracy. Five, the revolts represent a weakening not only of the ruling regimes, but of many of the traditional opposition forces in the Middle East states as well. Sixth, as of May 2011, with the exception of Libya and Bahrain, the revolts spared the major oil and gas exporters of the region.

2011 Middle East developments

Beginning in December 2010 and continuing throughout the first half of 2011 populist revolts took place in a number of states in the Middle East: Egypt, Tunis, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria. Mass protests have taken place also in Jordan and violent attacks in Morocco. As of May 2011, the protests have led to the following results: the resignation of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his replacement by the Egyptian military which has committed to hold elections in fall 2011; the resignation of Tunis president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and his replacement by a caretaker government until elections take place; and the agreement in principle of Yemen President Ali Abdullah Saleh to resign from power. In parallel, a civil war has emerged in Libya,

and NATO forces have intervened militarily on behalf of anti-Qaddafi forces. In addition, Saudi Arabian forces have taken control of Bahrain at the invitation of the ruling monarchy there in order to prevent its overthrow. Violent protests are continuing in Syria and threaten to bring down the Assad regime, which has already killed hundreds of protestors in attempts to put down the rebellion.

“In fact, President Obama seemed quite caught off guard in his response to the revolt against U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak and vacillated in his responses to the events. Europe, with the exception of the NATO intervention in Libya, has also been quite muted in its response to the events.”

These revolts and mass protests have displayed a number of features. One, internet based social networking tools Facebook and Twitter have played a major role in mobilization of participants and getting them to the streets. Second, the revolts have been state based and directed against respective governments of the demonstrators. Thus, while they have taken place in a variety of locations in the Middle East in parallel, the demands in each location are local

based and there does not seem to be any coordination or trans-state ideology that is uniting the various movements. Thus, despite shared religion, culture and language, national identities and politics are more prominent in these political developments than the trans-state movements in the Middle East. Third, outside support and intervention seem to play almost no role in the emergence of the revolts. In fact, President Obama seemed quite caught off guard in his response to the revolt against U.S. ally Hosni Mubarak and vacillated in his responses to the events. Europe, with the exception of the NATO intervention in Libya, has also been quite muted in its response to the events. However, intra-Arab activity had a profound impact on the developments, especially the reports of Al-Jazeera on the events. Fourth, a distinguishing feature of the events is that as of May 2011, they have afflicted mostly countries where large segments of the population are poor and have bypassed the richest states that are major oil and natural gas exporters. A rise in food and fuel prices seems to be an impetus for the timing of the revolts. Most of the major oil and gas exporters in the region have been able to for the most part shield their populations through subsidies from the effects of the recent price rises. Next, the new political activity

challenged the ruling regimes, but also the traditional opposition forces in many of these states, which did not play a leadership role in most of the events. Last, while it appears that through modern technology the public has more access to information, during these revolts almost all received information was biased and tainted: government and opposition. Regular media outlets, such as CNN, broadcast raw materials given to them by activists and the participants themselves in the demonstrations and conducted little independent analysis and collection of information. The chief media outlet covering the events, Al-Jazeera, for instance, was quite selective in how it covered the events, depending on which side it supported. Al-Jazeera (and most Western media outlets) hardly covered the Saudi takeover of Bahrain, something in which both the United States and the ruling monarchies in the Gulf are united in their support.

Implications for democracy in the Middle East: Is this the Arab spring?

The appearance of mass protests throughout the Middle East and their success in a number of locations to bring about the resignation of heads of state that have ruled for a number of decades is indeed a dramatic de-

velopment in this region. While waves of transition to democracy have affected regimes all over the globe in the second half of the twentieth century, the Middle East remained unaffected. To date, only two democracies function in the Middle East: Israel and Turkey, the rest of the ruling regimes in the region composed of monarchies, military regimes, single party regimes or hybrids of these forms. The only Arab states with broad, regular political participation are Lebanon and the Palestinian Authority, and in both violent activity and intervention often determine the political outcomes.

The revolts have been successful in bringing down a number of ruling regimes in the Middle East and most likely will continue and spread and afflict additional regimes. At the same time, it is in no way clear that the demise of a number of the regimes in the region will necessarily bring a transition to democracy. An autocratic regime can be replaced by a variety of regime types: a different autocratic regime, theoretic, democratic, etc. The demise of the autocratic regime can also lead to a breakdown of ruling institutions and lead to a failed state. The skills and resources necessary to bring down a regime are not the same as those necessary to build a democratic government.

Thus, analysis as to whether these revolts signify the beginning of mass democratic transition in the Middle East should be tempered with a number of points. First, most of the societies in the Middle East have not undergone modernization (merit based work force that crosses various sectors of the society, social mobility, integration of women and minorities in the economy and political life, well-functioning and relatively free communication and information in-

“While Arab societies employ modern technology (cell phones, internet, etc.) this should not be confused with modernization. In addition, the majority of the states of the Middle East possess quite low levels of human development, despite the immense oil wealth in the region.”

frastructure). Modernization is an important condition for successful democratic transition. While Arab societies employ modern technology (cell phones, internet, etc.) this should not be confused with modernization. In addition, the majority of the states of the Middle East possess quite low levels of human development, despite the immense oil wealth in the

region.¹ Next, the transition of power will not change the economic conditions that served as an impetus to the revolts. The new governments will have to deal with the same economic and social conditions that prevailed under their predecessors and contributed to public outrage against their governments. In order to improve the situation, the new regimes will have to undertake painful economic reforms, which in the short run will create public animosity against the new governments and thus opposition to the transition. Third, the level of political commitment created by Twitter and Facebook based movements is quite low and does not represent strong, established, deep-rooted movements. The political activity united by internet social networks contrasts sharply with the well-organized movements that functioned in Eastern Europe and in parts of the Soviet Union in the mid and late 1980s, which contributed to the demise of the communist regimes. These new movements in the Middle East do not seem to have well established institutions, financial bases, or united vision. In the post-revolt period and in elections, it is not clear how active or influential these new forces will be and other opposition forces, such as religious movements, may reap the benefits of the revolts.

¹ <http://www.arab-hdr.org/contents/index.aspx?rid=5>

Thus, it is not clear in what direction the regimes will develop in the Middle East and there is no direct trajectory that the demise of an autocratic regime is followed by the establishment of democratic government. In addition, the events may bring a general weakening of the state in the region, and this may not help to deal with the major social and economic problems that plague the region. At the same time, unquestionably these revolts represent a significant change for the Middle East. Arab rulers can no longer count on complicity and cooption of their subjects, many who long to be citizens.