

### Farewell to an Age of Tyranny? The Egyptian Spring as a Model

Elie Podeh<sup>1</sup>

When Husni Mubarak looked out of his palace window on 25 January 2011 and saw demonstrators on the street below him, he turned to his advisor and exclaimed: "My God! It's a revolt!" "No, my President," the advisor answered, "that is a revolution." True, this fabled quote is attributed to French King Louis XVI, who is said to have uttered it on 14 July 1789.<sup>2</sup> Yet, judging by the mild response of the Egyptian police forces to the demonstrations, it appears that, like Louis XVI, Mubarak did indeed underestimate the significance of the events unfolding before him. Furthermore, the parable draws our attention to the important distinction between a revolt, a takeover, and a coup on the one hand, and a revolution on the other.

The events in Tunisia, Egypt, and other Arab countries caught many observers of the Middle East by surprise. Few predicted the possibility of popular uprisings leading to the downfall of entrenched, authoritarian regimes.<sup>3</sup> The aim of this short paper is to analyze the main reasons for the events in Egypt that led to the demise of the Mubarak regime and their implications for other parts of the Arab world. While many Arab countries witnessed upheavals following those in Tunisia and Egypt, others were little affected or completely bypassed by this revolutionary fervor. The reasons for these differences call for further explanation.

Scholarly assessments of revolutions tend to fall into one of two categories: those that measure a revolution by its successes and achievements; and those that emphasize the revolutionary process rather than its outcome. For the purposes of our analysis, I adopt Michael Kimmel's definition of revolution, which posits that "revolutions are attempts by subordinate groups to transform the social foundations of political power."<sup>4</sup> This definition is useful

---

<sup>1</sup> Professor Elie Podeh teaches in the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> The story opens Michael S. Kimmel's *Revolution: A Sociological Interpretation* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> For some rare exceptions, see John R. Bradley, *Inside Egypt: The Land of the Pharaohs on the Brink of a Revolution* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2008); David Ottaway, *Egypt at the Tipping Point?* Occasional Paper Series (Washington: Woodrow Wilson International Center, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Kimmel, *Revolution*, p. 6. For other definitions, see, for example, Lawrence Stone, "Theories of Revolutions," *World Politics*, Vol. 18 (1966), pp. 159-176; Michael D. Richards,

## *The Egyptian Spring*

for several reasons: it differentiates between revolutions and other forms of social change, such as coups and rebellions; it includes successful and unsuccessful revolutions; it embraces a large number of sequences over various time spans; and it includes both violent and peaceful modes of change.<sup>5</sup> Such a definition suggests that the events in Egypt and Tunisia, and perhaps in other Arab countries, can be classified as revolutions.

Regardless of the theoretical debate over the meaning of revolution, the events in Tunisia and Egypt constituted the first time popular uprisings have brought down regimes in the Arab world. In contrast to Iran, the Arab world has witnessed regime change solely through military coups (*inqilab*), which took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s. Though these coups were described as revolutions (*thawra*), the fact of the matter was that they usually represented only a change in the governing elite. In certain cases the coups initiated a process of profound political, social, and economic change that eventually culminated in a revolution (Nasser's Egypt being the primary example).

Arab intellectuals and media pundits were quick to describe the current events as an Arab Spring or an awakening of the underprivileged classes. The fact that the movements could be described as "revolutions" earned a positive image for their leaders. For example, Rashid Khalidi, Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University, wrote: "Suddenly, to be an Arab has become a good thing. People all over the Arab world feel a sense of pride in shaking off decades of cowed passivity under dictatorships that ruled with no deference to popular wishes."<sup>6</sup> Another proud statement was offered by Sajida Tasneem:

The 'chaotic', 'irrational', 'weak' and 'politically inept' people of the Orient, once deemed incapable of bringing 'order' and considered 'incompatible' with democracy, have now not only managed to topple a dictator and pave the way for crucial political and constitutional reforms, but just as significantly they have also managed to achieve this by themselves without the help of the charitable hand of the West.<sup>7</sup>

---

*Revolutions in World History* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 1-11; Noel Parker, *Revolutions and History: An Essay in Interpretation* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), pp. 1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Kimmel, *Revolution*, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Rashid Khalidi, "The Arab Spring," *Agence Global*, 3 March 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Sajida Tasneem, "Democracy, Egyptian Style," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 1039, 17-23 March 2011. See also el-Sayed Amin Shalabi, "We're Not That Different After All," *ibid.* The same idea was voiced by the Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu, "We in the Middle East Have Replaced Humiliation with Dignity," *The Guardian*, 15 March 2011.

## *The Egyptian Spring*

A revolution, according to Kimmel, occurs as the culmination of three temporal moments: *preconditions*—the “longer-run, structural shifts in the social foundations of the society”; *precipitants*—the shorter-run historical events that “allow these deeply seated structural forces to emerge as politically potent and begin to mobilize potential discontents”; and *triggers*—the immediate historical events that set the revolutionary process in motion.”<sup>8</sup>

With the wisdom of hindsight, we can see that Egypt witnessed these three historical phases. The first precondition is the existence of an authoritarian regime beginning in the 1950s and ending with Mubarak’s thirty-year rule. During that period, the military-civilian elite consolidated its power and guaranteed its survival by certain institutional mechanisms, such as the Constitution, the Emergency Laws, and Parliament. The regime allowed only limited political activity and freedom of expression, while overt expressions of opposition were dealt with harshly. The second precondition is the dramatic increase in Egypt’s population. Since 1950, Egypt’s population has quadrupled, growing from 21.4 to 83 million people. Although it succeeded in lowering the birth rate from 2.8% to 1.9% over the past three decades, the birth rate remains quite high and the regime has had to provide for an additional 1.6 million people each year. The long-term implications of this process entailed growing unemployment, deterioration in health and educational services, and an uneven social structure in which at least one third of the population remains below the age of fourteen.<sup>9</sup> Both these preconditions that were responsible for the creation of a revolutionary situation in Egypt are also present in other Arab countries.

The issues that precipitated the revolution in Egypt were numerous. The first was the question of Mubarak’s succession (*tawrih*). While certain amendments to the constitution in 2005 seemingly opened the way for a more democratic election process, Mubarak secured a sixth term as Egypt’s president that year. During that period he groomed his son, Gamal, as his successor. Gamal’s possible “enthronement” turned Egypt into a kind of monarchy, which Egyptian scholar and activist Sa’d Eddin Ibrahim aptly termed a *gumlukiya*—the combination of a republic (*gumhuriya*) and a monarchy (*malakiya*).<sup>10</sup> Many Egyptians considered this kind of “dynastic republicanism” an affront to their national dignity. One popular group that tried to prevent this eventuality was the Egyptian Movement for Change or

---

<sup>8</sup> Kimmel, *Revolution*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>9</sup> For data, see Onn Winckler, *Twentieth Century Political Demography in the Arab World* (Ra’anana: Open University, 2008), pp. 38, 46, 48, 83. [Hebrew]

<sup>10</sup> This phenomenon was relevant also in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. See Larbi Sadiki, “Whither Arab ‘Republicanism’? The Rise of Family Rule and the ‘End of Democratization’ In Egypt, Libya and Yemen,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 15 (2010), pp. 99-107.

## *The Egyptian Spring*

*Kifaya* ("Enough"), established in 2004. Jason Brownlee, a political scientist at the University of Texas at Austin, was right, therefore, to conclude that "each step that brings Gamal closer to the presidency... gives way to the potential for dramatically new developments, from an army coup to an Islamist takeover."<sup>11</sup> Further increasing the regime's unpopularity were the repeated rumors of excessive corruption associated with the Mubaraks and their cronies.

The second precipitant was the results of the November 2010 parliamentary elections, which were not monitored by impartial observers. In contrast to the composition of the 2005 parliament, which included 88 members affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (out of 454 seats), the post-November 2010 parliament included no members associated with the Brotherhood (out of an enlarged parliament of 518 seats). The virtual elimination of the opposition (the parliament included only 15 members from various opposition parties) attested to the corrupt nature of the elections.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a voter turnout of only ten percent signaled public apathy and distrust of the electoral process.

The third precipitant was the broad-based popular protest movement that had spread throughout Egyptian society since 2004. According to data from the Egyptian Human Rights Organization, about 1,900 strikes and demonstrations took place between 2004 and 2008, with the participation of some 1.7 million people.<sup>13</sup> Other figures cited by Joel Beinin indicate that about two million workers participated in 2,623 factory strikes between 1998 and 2008.<sup>14</sup> These strikes and demonstrations were often violently crushed by the security forces, leading to deaths and injuries. The main reasons for these strikes were the workers' fears of the adverse consequences of the privatization process, the desire to improve their living conditions, and rising unemployment (which soared beyond the official eight percent rate). The strikes were also a result of the rising cost of living and declining salaries, caused by changes in the global market. Between 1997 and 2007, food prices rose by twenty-five percent while wages remained stagnant. While the average wage is estimated to have increased by sixty percent between 1978 and 1988, prices soared by three hundred percent during that decade. The typical monthly wage of a textile worker is 250-600 Egyptian Pounds

---

<sup>11</sup> Jason Brownlee, "The Heir Apparency of Gamal Mubarak," *Arab Studies Journal*, Vol. 15/16 (Fall 2007/Spring 2008), pp. 52-53.

<sup>12</sup> MEMRI *Inquiry and Analysis Report*, No. 653, 28 December 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Land Center for Human Rights, <http://www.lchr-eg.org/>.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Beinin, "Workers' Protest in Egypt: Neo-liberalism and Class Struggle in 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Social Movement Studies*, Vol. 8 (2009), p. 449.

## *The Egyptian Spring*

(equivalent to 45-107 US dollars), which is below the World Bank's poverty line of two US dollars a day (for an average family of 3.7 people).<sup>15</sup>

The closure of the political system to these agents of change—workers and educated, unemployed youth—led to the emergence of the “6 April” movement, named for the date in 2008 when a large strike in a textile plant in Mahala al-Kubra was launched, and the National Movement for Change led by Muhammad El-Baradei (al-Barada'i), former Director General of the UN International Atomic Energy Agency. These new movements gathered supporters through social media networks on the internet, particularly Facebook. With tight government control of the press and TV, this new technology liberated the new generations by allowing them to operate almost freely in this virtual reality. In the words of Egyptian scholar and journalist Abdel-Moneim Said, “the Facebook youth gave Egypt a new face.”<sup>16</sup> The rapid emergence of these civil society forces indicates that Egyptians have become more sophisticated in the art of protest.

The trigger that set off these preconditions and precipitators was the mass demonstrations in Tunisia, which began on 14 January 2011 when a fruit seller named Muhammad Bouazizi set himself ablaze, and which ended with the collapse of the Zayn al-'Abidin Ben 'Ali regime. It should be emphasized, however, as many Egyptians later admitted, that when the date of 25 January—celebrated in Egypt as Police Day<sup>17</sup>—was fixed for the popular demonstration in Tahrir Square, no one could have predicted that the protests would lead to the downfall of the Mubarak regime. That outcome was facilitated by two additional factors. First, the fact that Mubarak was slow to react and unwilling to violently crush the riots—perhaps another sign of his deteriorating health—encouraged more people to join the protesters. Second, al-Jazeera's provocative coverage of the events further inflamed the masses. In fact, the global communication revolution—the introduction of cell phones, the internet, Facebook, and Twitter—facilitated the quick transfer of the revolution from one country to another.

The downfall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes quickly inspired many civil society groups in other Arab countries. Demonstrations demanding

---

<sup>15</sup> Bradley, *Inside Egypt*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>16</sup> Abdel-Moneim Said, “National Consensus Candidate Needed,” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 1036, 24 February – 2 March 2011.

<sup>17</sup> Police Day was declared an official holiday in 2009 to commemorate the massacre of over fifty policemen in Isma'iliyya by British forces on 25 January 1952, which triggered widespread demonstrations and riots in Egypt, leading eventually to the military takeover on 23 July 1952. The day of 25 January 2011 was deliberately chosen as a day of protest against the brutal measures employed by the police and security forces against the demonstrators in recent years.



## *The Egyptian Spring*

reform or regime change were held in Yemen, Libya, Syria, Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, Oman, and Iraq. The spillover effect was hardly surprising: The Arab world is a regional subsystem, consisting of several “proximate and interacting states which have some common ethnic, linguistic, cultural, social and historical bonds, and whose sense of identity is sometimes increased by the actions and attitudes of states external to the system.”<sup>18</sup> The fact that many Arabs viewed themselves as a distinctive group with its own unique patterns meant that a change at one point in the subsystem affected its other points. This Arab inter-connectedness is facilitated by the emergence of an intra-Arab dialogue in new media outlets—satellite TV stations such as al-Jazeera and al-Arabiyya and pan-Arab London-based newspapers such as *al-Hayat* and *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, as well as many Arab internet sites.

Arab countries can be divided into four categories according to how the revolutionary process has progressed in each. The first group includes states that have already passed through the first stage of revolution—Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and, probably soon, Yemen. The second encompasses states that are in the midst of the revolutionary struggle—particularly Syria and perhaps Bahrain. The third group includes states that have witnessed some sporadic demonstrations but where protests have not yet reached the masses—Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. Finally, the fourth includes states that have so far remained unaffected by the events—Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Lebanon, Sudan, and Palestine. Naturally, this is not a rigid division and states may move from one category to another at almost any time.

What are the possible reasons for the different reactions in the Arab world? It should be emphasized that not every Arab country was or is likely to witness a revolution. For example, military coups in the 1950s and 1960s succeeded in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Sudan, and Libya but failed in Jordan and Lebanon and did not occur at all in most North-African or Gulf countries. It seems that five elements affect the chances that a revolution will occur. First, geographical proximity has some influence; it cannot be a coincidence that three of the major revolutions occurred in North Africa. Second, the existence of a heterogeneous society may exacerbate tensions leading to public protests. Third, the reaction of the security forces to the challenge posed to the regime undoubtedly affects its continuation: a mild reaction encourages the protesters while a harsh reaction discourages them. Still, the brutal reaction of the Qaddafi regime in Libya did not deter the demonstrators there. Fourth, certain regimes—particularly those in rich, oil-producing countries—possess

---

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Elie Podeh, “The Emergence of the Arab State System Reconsidered,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, Vol. 9 (1998), p. 51.

## *The Egyptian Spring*

enough financial resources to appease potential agitators. Finally, there are states that are occupied with other domestic problems (Palestine, for example, is focused on the desire to end Israeli occupation) or are haunted by memories of previous civil wars (Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria, and Sudan).

The coming months will show how the revolutions in Egypt and the neighboring Arab countries are to unfold. According to sociologist Rex Hopper, the revolutionary process runs in four stages: the preliminary stage of individual excitement and unrest; the popular stage of mass or collective excitement and unrest; the formal stage when *esprit de corps* is solidified and issues and organizational structures are defined; and, finally, the institutional stage of legislation and societal organization through which the “out-groups” legalize and organize their power, thereby becoming the “in-group of the structure of the political power.”<sup>19</sup> Tunisia and Egypt, and perhaps Libya, have reached the final stage of institutionalizing the achievements of the revolution. This is the most crucial stage, which determines the degree of success of the revolution. Since forces in favor of maintaining the status quo have not been completely eliminated (e.g., the army and the bureaucracy), the possibilities for setback, impasse, and even counter-revolution should not be ruled out. Fears of such scenarios are voiced in the Arab press.<sup>20</sup> In this respect, perhaps the revolutions in Europe in 1848-1849, when progress and regression went hand in hand, are the best analogy to the Arab revolutions. In 1849, according to journalist Anne Applebaum, “many of the revolutions of 1848 might have seemed disastrous, but looking back from 1899 or 1919, they seemed like the beginning of a successful change.”<sup>21</sup>

The next stage of the revolution in Egypt will involve the formation of a new balance of power between three elements: the army, which is keen to preserve its security and economic interests; the Islamists (mainly the Muslim Brotherhood); and the more liberal-secular youth. This is an uneven triangle, with disparate aims and modes of operation.<sup>22</sup> All this may settle into one of three scenarios: the continued rule of the old political and economic elite, led by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF);<sup>23</sup> the formation of an Islamic state resembling the Turkish model; or the emergence of a new kind

---

<sup>19</sup> Rex Hopper, “The Revolutionary Process: A Frame of Reference for the Study of Revolutionary Movements,” *Social Forces*, Vol. 28 (1950), pp. 270-279.

<sup>20</sup> Dina Ezzat, “A Justified Fear?” *Al-Ahram Weekly*, No. 1040, 24-30 March 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Anne Applebaum, “In the Arab World, It’s 1848 – Not 1989,” *The Washington Post*, 21 February 2011.

<sup>22</sup> The United States and the West also played an important role in these revolutions. Libya stands as a prime example, but there are indications that the United States may have coordinated with the Egyptian army in the toppling of Mubarak.

<sup>23</sup> With regard to Egypt, Ellis Goldberg called this scenario “Mubarakism without Mubarak.” *Foreign Affairs*, 11 February 2011.

## *The Egyptian Spring*

of revolution, a hybrid model that would combine religious and secular elements. The coming elections for both parliament and the presidency will determine the nature of the emerging model.

The Arab revolutions were, to a large extent, “faceless”; no charismatic leader has yet emerged. In the near future, it is expected that new leaders will appear; their absence will no doubt damage the revolution’s ability to achieve its aims.<sup>24</sup> On the whole, this transitional period may witness instability and possibly the use of violence by underprivileged tribal, sectarian, or religious groups, particularly in heterogeneous societies. The civil war in Libya is a case in point, and there are indications that Syria is following Libya. Some Arab countries may weather the storm by initiating a set of reforms. The result would be a “refolution,” a term coined by historian Timothy Ash with regard to the events in Eastern Europe in 1989, which would involve a hybrid transformation including both reform and revolution.<sup>25</sup> In his famed satire *Animal Farm*, George Orwell wrote that under the devastating impact of Communism and Fascism, “all revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure.” The Arab people hope to see their revolutions as successes, though they will certainly not be the same success.

The precise political outcomes of the revolutions are still unclear. So far, no new social contract between ruler and ruled has emerged in Tunisia or Egypt. Yet, it is safe to assume that Arab rulers will have to be more responsive to their people; relying on sheer, brutal force to maintain power will not suffice in the long run. The social forces unleashed by the revolution—the young, lower-middle-class, either liberal or Islamist—will return to the street if other avenues of expression are blocked by the regime. In addition, the new language of Tahrir Square—the discourse of human rights, democracy, and pluralism—will strike roots. In light of these developments, it can be said that the “Arabs came together to bid farewell to an age of quiescence.”<sup>26</sup>

The fact that a revolution occurred in Egypt—historically the most important Arab country that has in the past led the processes of modernization, anti-colonial struggle, and the emergence of military-led regimes—means that we will continue to witness its effect on other Arab states given their structural, historical, and cultural similarities. In Fouad Ajami’s apt description, “when

---

<sup>24</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Hoping for Arab Mandelas,” *The New York Times*, 26 March 2011.

<sup>25</sup> R. J. Crampton, *Eastern Europe in the Twentieth Century – and After*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 407; John Keane, “Refolution in the Arab World,” *Open Democracy*, 28 April 2011, <http://www.opendemocracy.net/john-keane/refolution-in-arab-world>.

<sup>26</sup> Fouad Ajami, “How the Arabs Turned Shame into Liberty,” *The New York Times*, 26 February 2011.



## *The Egyptian Spring*

the revolt arrived in Cairo, it found a stage worthy of its ambitions.”<sup>27</sup> For the first time since the days of Nasser’s charismatic leadership, Egypt has returned to the vanguard of the Arab world, once again serving as an inspiring model.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

---

<sup>27</sup> Fouad Ajami, “Egypt’s Heroes with No Names,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 12 February 2011.