

Cyclone

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Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:
The turmoil that changed the Middle East

Can the Democratic Vision be Realized in the Arab World?

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It has been an entire decade since Tunisian street vendor Mohamad Boua`zizi set himself on fire, leading to a huge chain reaction that, in its first phase, toppled many regimes and ousted several rulers in the Arab world. These days, young Arabs, who were children or teens when the Arab Spring began, no longer share the same dreams that the young men and women of 2010-2011 did. They have utterly despaired of the possibility of establishing a new political order, of democratization, a social reform, or economic success. Instead, they yearn to leave their homelands behind and immigrate to the Gulf, where absolute monarchies have paradoxically become the ideal model of an Arab state in the eyes of many.

Although some form of opposition existed in many of the countries where public protests broke out in 2011 (such as Egypt, Yemen, and Bahrain), very few were able to clearly and poignantly formulate their demands or outline the regime they desire. Moreover, for the most part, the protests were disorganized, and the opposition groups claiming to head them were divided among themselves, having no shared objectives.

The signs held at Tahrir Square in Cairo in January and February 2011 exemplified the many facets of Arab Spring revolutions: some called for the establishment of a democratic regime; others demanded social justice; and many featured extreme Islamic slogans. Thus, all who attempted to paint the protest in the colors of a public movement aiming to realize a democratic-liberal vision were forced to face a harsh reality.

The absence of leadership made matters easier for the revolutionists, as the regime struggled to identify and neutralize the leading forces. However, once the main goal set

by the protesters had been achieved, i.e., ousting their ruler, many were unsure how to define their next step, and played no part in the decision-making process. The chaotic state of affairs that followed the revolutions meant that only the strongest and most organized – led by the Islamic organizations – survived and became dominant.

One factor was shared by all – from liberal students in the American University in Cairo to the most extreme of Salafi in Tunisia – opposing their ruler who became a symbol of anachronistic, thoroughly rotten order. In Egypt the masses demanded the execution of Mubarak, in Syria Bashar Assad was depicted in a coffin, and rumors of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's family fleeing with suitcases full of jewelry and Dollars spread throughout Tunisia (and turned out to be true).

To some extent, the masses were right. For decades those rulers had left empty shells of their governmental institutions, causing detriment to their courts, parliaments, and media outlets. Some had relied on military support, others turned to mercenaries who were loyal to them personally, or to networks of tribes and groups to which they belonged. Most Arab regimes did not allow political parties to exist, leaving their countries devoid of a political culture that enables gradual establishment of institutions and processes, or evolving political parties and movements.

All these processes led to most Arab states having no functioning state institutions when the Arab Spring began. The Egyptian police force hid in houses for fear of civilians' retaliation efforts, or sent hordes of thugs to deal with protesters. The Syrian government provided no state services in areas controlled by the rebels. Schools and universities stopped teaching in large parts of the Arab world, the work of the courts was disrupted, and food supply ran low.

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In most Arab countries, the revolutionists could not control the chaos that followed the collapse of government systems or the intentional actions of the Deep State – the state lurking beneath the surface, often called "the state within the state". Even when rulers were ousted and national councils and governments disbanded, the strong, fixed pillars of these countries – primarily their various defense establishments – held onto power.

They were supported by Arab countries that were less impacted by the Arab Spring, aiming to stop turmoil from reaching their region, and impede the spread of revolution into their territory.

As mentioned, the only ones who could cope well with the undermining of existing order, and even use it to their advantage, were members of the Muslim Brotherhood. Being well-organized, having a clear ideology and a strong hold on the public sphere enabled them to survive, and even preserve their power despite dozens of years of oppression by Arab rulers. When the latter were gone, they seized the opportunity to realize their own vision. Supporters of democracy in the Arab world remained fundamentally weak once again, left to choose between the lesser of two evils: an authoritarian regime like the one they had struggled against, or the dominance of Islamic forces.

The current circumstances of those who sought to be depicted as the rising forces of democracy, and strove to lead the Arab world in a new direction, are very bleak: many activists in such organizations have been imprisoned, the lives of others ended tragically, while others still who were more fortunate fled, leaving their beloved homelands behind for fear of their safety, having despaired of all hope to bring about a more profound change in the Arab world.

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The causes of the Arab Spring – poverty, unemployment, corruption and police brutality – still exist, as does the desire among various groups in society to promote democratization. If we look ahead, the only chance of stabilizing the region lies in the establishment of efficient and honest government institutions as part of a determined, ongoing fight against government corruption, as well as the formation of new, democratic systems. Only then will the return to violence brought on by autocracies be avoided. But it is imperative that we acknowledge that this process will be long and hard, so we may refrain from promoting drastic and rapid changes, particularly those that are encouraged by external forces, as such steps have already proven that the damage they cause far exceeds the benefit they offer.