Arab Democratic Uprisings: Domestic, Regional and Global Implications

Abdennour Benantar, Université Paris 8
Arab Democratic Uprisings: Domestic, Regional and Global Implications

Abdennour Benantar

Abstract

The 2011 Arab uprisings so far represent a mixed bag. Only those in Tunisia and Egypt have succeeded, while those elsewhere are in the process of being put down by force. Even in the two successful cases, the regimes themselves have remained in place, despite the departure of those in power at the very top. Nevertheless, the sheer courage and willpower of these uprisings on the part of the Arab people will have far reaching effects for a long time to come, particularly on their countries’ relations with the West.

KEYWORDS: Arab uprisings, Middle East, Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, democratization, regime change, Palestinians
Despite the successive democratization waves in the world, especially since the end of the Cold War, the Arab world did not fall into step with the new democracies. In fact, the Arab world has seen the failure of the mini-process of democratic transition in the beginning of the 1990s. The results were the rise of Islamism as a major actor, political violence and finally the perpetuation of existing regimes. Because of their certainties, the regimes did not see the current revolts coming, although crises have shaken several countries. The Tunisian uprising, which overthrew in January 2011 Ben Ali (in power since 1987), inaugurated a new era in Arab politics.

While attention has focused on the evolution of the military situation in Libya of Gaddafi (in power since 1969), the Arab revolution is continuing (in Syria, Yemen…). In Tunisia and Egypt, two countries in “transition,” the popular mobilization against the “counter-revolution” forces is huge. Regarding the spillover effect, the popular momentum of the Arab uprisings seems to be irreversible. Of course the diversity of national contexts involves diversity of process and trajectories (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain). It is too early to derive lessons from these democratic uprisings which are underway and nobody knows what their final results will be. Moreover, their unpredictable character and scale require prudence. So we must be content with some preliminary reflections.

In spite of the democratic revolts, until now there is no fundamental change of the regime in the Arab world. The two successful cases of transformation, Tunisia and Egypt, indicate that the head of the executive power of the established regime has been fallen but not the regime. The uprisings did not lead to genuine change. In this regard, these uprisings do not signify revolutions. The current revolts did not introduce a rupture with the elite and past of the authoritarian regime. Despite the exclusion of Ben Ali and Mubarak, the “former” ruling elites are still in power. Furthermore, the revolutionaries did not control the “transition” process in the two states. The political deals were negotiated without them; it’s the “ancient-new” opposition which is dealing with the “new-ancient” regime. In addition, some authoritarian constitutional rules are preserved as illustrated by the Egyptian case. Egypt voted overwhelmingly for constitutional amendments paving the way for parliamentary elections, but these amendments did not modify the significant constitutional prerogatives of the president. In short, a rupture with authoritarian elites and heritage is necessary to bring about a genuine change.

There is a kind of conviction, in some of the literature, about the existence of an “Arab exception” because of the lack of democracy throughout the Arab world. Despite its essentialist character, even discretionary one, this idea is based on an irrefutable argument: there is no genuinely democratic state in the Arab world. Religion is used some times as argument to explain this phenomenon but it
is not relevant because of the existence of democracies elsewhere in the Islamic world. In fact, there are many factors explaining the lack of democracy which are not linked to any essentialist approach. Today, the Arab revolts and their quick spread show that the democratic aspirations exist and can be expressed peacefully (without violence) and efficiently (fall of authoritarian heads).

The Tunisian democratic revolt has shown that pacific change is possible and can give arise a new era in the region. In the past, the Arab world was trapped by the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence, involving regimes, on the one hand, and certain organizations and parties on the other hand, while most people remained silent. This vicious circle is getting the region nowhere. But since the beginning of the revolt in Tunisia, the people have taken destiny in hand and succeeded with their own “revolution.” It’s the first Arab experience with successful, pacific change lead by the people. The limits of change by violence as an instrument advocated by extremists and terrorist groups have been shown by the pacific uprisings. Arab societies can, like other societies, start a process of change without sinking into violence. Certainly, the revolts are not uniform because of the diversity of the national contexts, but the Tunisian and Egyptian cases denote the pacific nature of these Arab democratic revolts.

Regarding the authoritarian nature of the regimes and the penetration of the Arab world by external actors, the change is generally happening according to a top-down approach: natural death (with inheritance as the result), soft putsch (only two cases: overthrow of Bourguiba by Ben Ali in Tunisia in 1987 and that of the emir of Qatar by his son, the current emir, in 1995) or hard putsch with Lebanon as a specific case. With the success of the Tunisian revolt, change happened from the bottom-up for the first time in modern Arab political history.

The current uprisings indicate the end of the popular or social resignation which means the end of a certain form of fear. Beforehand, the people were afraid to protest and to contest the established regimes. But since the Tunisian revolt and its spillover effect, it is clear that fear switched sides. Now, the regimes fear that their days are numbered. In the Arab world, the democracy is now with arm’s reach of the Arab people.

The democratic revolts are not being led by Islamist movements. The absence of Islamists from Tunisian revolt is revealing at this regard. The youth protesters have no ideological references. Of course, Islamist elements and movements are present among them, but neither Islamist ideology nor Islamist leaders are the organizers of the popular protests. In fact, Islamist groups and parties as well as other opposition parties were surprised by the uprisings, their scale and their quick effects. Neither Islamist, nor westernized, the Arab democratic revolts are a genuine endogenous and popular phenomenon, without clear political guidance or manipulation, internal or external. Indeed, these uprisings are independent from both domestic ideology and from external control.
The current democratic revolts also mark the end of the “choice,” as perceived by the West, between secular authoritarian regimes and fundamentalist ones in the Arab world. This duality has structured the Western policy regarding the region. Western powers have always preferred stability to democracy, and supported authoritarian regimes by asserting the risk of fundamentalism. This duality has been used by the local regimes against their people: you have to choose between “us” and “them.” Thus, the Arab people were stuck between the devil (authoritarian secular regimes) and the deep blue sea (fundamentalism). The current uprisings show that the Arab people are liberating themselves from this imposed “choice.” They have demonstrated that another alternative exists: the democratic one.

The two major domestic/regional consequences of the Arab revolts are: the end of the presidency-for-life and the inheritance of power. The Arab political landscape has been marked during last decade by the two phenomena which are linked because the second option is an option by default; it is chosen when the first is not possible because of the age of the president. The presidency-for-life was the main political project of regimes in many Arab states. It is one of the most important causes of the political stagnation in these states and by consequence a major reason for the revolts. The case of the Syrian Bashar al Assad, the sole “successful” case of a non-monarchic inheritance of power in the Arab region, is now in the balance. The three countries where the regimes prepared the inheritance of power are: Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Tunisia (in the Tunisian case the inheritance concerned the younger son-in-law of the deposed president Ben Ali).

What about the context in which these two major political drifts have emerged? If Islamism, especially armed Islamism, has allowed the regimes to perpetuate their authoritarian power with the complicity of the West, so too has terrorism, following 9/11, permitted these regimes to begin a process of *countdown transition*: presidency-for-life and inheritance of power. All means were put into service for the realization of this project. In a sense it has meant that the inheritance at the economic level: the public funds, companies, etc. are controlled by the president, his family, immediate entourage and the political clients (crony capitalism). Arab states adopted the market economy but at the same time organized (legally) state monopolies! This is the mafia drift of the regimes. It is at this stage that the de-linkage between political liberalization and economic liberalization was a strategic mistake: without democratic mechanisms of control, the economy cannot be developed sanely.

Thus, the inheritance of power has been preceded by that of economic power (act I). The aim was to put the public funds into service of this political project. Thus, the road was paved for the political phase (act II). Is not a pure coincidence if the beneficiaries of the inheritance of power are presented as

---

Benantar: Arab Democratic Uprisings

Published by Berkeley Electronic Press, 2011
successful businessmen. The *economic success story* has been designed to serve as launch pad of the *political success story*, particularly in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya.

Of course democratic pressures in each of these states are related to those nearby. To understand their various positions, we suggest the following typology:

The first one is represented by Saudi Arabia which is intervening militarily in Bahrain to *save the regime from people* and warning its own people against any demonstrations in the cities. In this sense, Saudi Arabia is intolerant internally as well as externally. But it is moving into the tolerant camp concerning Libya. In addition to the geographic and confessional (Sunnis/Shi’a) factors, this contradiction is a result of a deal between Western powers, United States in particular, and Saudi Arabia: Saudi support to the Western military intervention in Libya in exchange of Saudi military intervention in Bahrain. It seems that Saudi Arabia has entered a curious bargaining process with the West. The attitude of Qatar is evolving in the same sense: political repression domestically and interventionism regionally (symbolic participation to the Western anti-Gaddafi coalition). Its position is also determined, in some extent, by the same deal. Bahrain is for the Gulf States a red line for any spillover effect. In fact, some states have supported the Arab League decision (of a no fly zone in Libya) and the Security Council resolution (1973), and participated to the military intervention in Libya in order to provide Arab legitimacy to this international action and especially to keep out of the Western line of slight. The second one is that of the states which are all intolerant internally and refuse foreign intervention, but support the decision of the Arab League concerning the establishment of a no fly zone in Libya and the UN Security Council resolution. The third one is represented by Algeria and Syria, intolerant at home as well as abroad. The two states refuse any international intervention in the domestic affairs of other Arab states. This category is characterized by its minority position, the regional weight of its actors and particularly by its coherence (intolerance at home and abroad). The common denominator of the Arab states in all categories – except the two states (Tunisia and Egypt) in “transition” – is the intolerance of democracy.

Will the current revolts lead to a change in the Arab policies regarding Israel? Will the “international community” at war against Libya of Gaddafi – in the name of morality – in order to support the people and the insurgents do the same thing to protect the Palestinian people? The answer to the second question is clear: no. Concerning the first question, we can say that democracy in the Arab world will lead unavoidably to a change in the Arab policies vis-à-vis Israel. Arab democracy is in favor of a real and sustainable peace, not a cold peace with occupation. It is clear that the absence of democracy is the Achilles’ heel of the Arab states in their relations with United States and Israel. The Egyptian case is revealing in this regard.
Egypt is the first Arab state that signed a peace treaty with Israel. But would this treaty have been ratified if the Egypt of Sadat had been a democracy? It is improbable. An analysis of this treaty shows that the demilitarization on the both sides of boundaries is clearly asymmetric in favor of Israel (near of 4/5 of the Sinai is demilitarized and Egypt cannot build military infrastructure), and important concessions have been made to Israel. A democratically elected parliament would not have accepted this treaty on these terms. That said, the establishment of democracy in Egypt does not mean a withdrawal from this treaty, but it is probable that a democratic Egypt would request an amendment of some its clauses for equilibrium between the interests of the two countries.

But what can the “new” power in Egypt do? Not much. The Egyptian army has understood the situation and assured Western powers and Israel that post-Mubarak Egypt shall respect all its regional and international commitments (i.e. Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty). This is a realist vision. Firstly, Egypt is in a precarious situation and it has no interest to open any new breach. Secondly, any change which is likely to indicate an alteration of some Egyptian regional positions will be stopped. Thirdly, Egypt needs international support, politically and financially; it must show that there is no change in its foreign policy. Fourthly, the question is not about the possible renunciation of the treaty but just about the fairness of its provisions.

On the basis of these factors, we can suggest a provisional conclusion: there will be continuity in Egyptian policy regarding Israel as proved by the Egyptian official reaction to the Israeli raids against Gaza in last March 2011. The Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs declared that the “violence” is not in the interest of the two parties. The term “violence” is neutral and beyond the problematic of reprisals-counter reprisals. He also insisted on not giving Israel a “pretext” for wider conflict. This referred to the Palestinians who advocate resistance to the Israeli occupation. He also recalled the position of his country condemning any attack against civilians: this is the traditional Egyptian policy. As we said above, there is no change of the regime in Egypt: what has happened is the fall of the executive head but this does not mark a rupture with the authoritarian elite and past of the regime.

Because of the importance of Palestinian issue in Egypt, the “new” power in Cairo will be under high popular pressure to allow demonstrations against Israeli policy. Israeli conduct regarding the Palestinians will aggravate the difficulties of the “new” power in its regional diplomacy. The Palestinian issue, and especially Mubarak’s policy during the Israeli war against Gaza, has to some extent contributed to its fall. The Egyptian revolt is the only Arab revolt that has been largely concerned with regional issues. Because of the imbrications between its domestic and regional/international dimensions, the polarization between the two dimensions will be highly destabilizing for the “new” power. In the past, the
power decided and imposed its will by force when necessary. Now, the context is different.

Egypt is a key Arab state and any regime change could have a high impact on the Arab world and the Middle East. For this reason, the United States is highly concerned. This explains the American official position supporting democratic claims in the region and “working” with the “new” power in Tunisia and Egypt in order to assure a “smooth” transition. Smooth transition means a negotiated transition, in Egypt mainly, to avoid any genuine change in Egyptian foreign policy. Is it an American attempt to exercise a certain control over the Egyptian and Arab emerging democracies? If external actors cannot impose democracy, they can hinder it.

The Arab revolts are also an occasion to note the permanence of Western double standards. The Western powers intervening in Libya have justified the military operation on moral grounds. But curiously the principle which has global validity is highly selective in practice. The Palestinian people have never benefited from this principle and the Bahraini people do not now. The Libyan and Bahraini cases prove that the strategic imperatives outweigh moral ones for the West. In Libya they intervene to protect the people and insurgents against the regime, but in Bahrain the Inter-Arab intervention, authorized or at least tolerated by Western powers is to protect the regime against the people! Despite the specificities of each case – the massive use of military force by the Libyan regime – the difference between the two cases is in degree, not in kind.

The double standard is observable also in the cases of Libya and Yemen. In the first, military raids take precedence to any political resolution; while in the second, the Gulf states – which intervened militarily in the Libyan crisis – are conducting political mediation between the regime and the opposition to find a pacific solution. Thus, America has authorized or at least tolerated military subcontracting in Bahrain and political/security subcontracting in Yemen. Its conduct is motivated by strategic imperatives. Generally, the conduct of the Western powers regarding Bahrain and elsewhere contradicts the values that it is supposed to promote in Libya.

In short, the absence of any international protection of Palestinian people, the international military operation in Libya and the Inter-Arab political and military intervention in Bahrain illustrate, once again, the primacy of strategic imperatives in this region.

But this Western strategic conduct may be challenged by a new era, that of the Arab emerging democracies which will require humanitarian intervention to protect the Palestinian people. So, the Western powers will be obliged to force an end to the Israeli occupation of Arab territories. These powers have to demonstrate that the democracies don’t go to war with each other, including in the Middle East. In this sense, the democratization of the Arab states will aggravate
the tension between strategic imperatives and moral values. The democratization of the Arab world will redefine relations between the West and Israel on the basis of mutual respect, shared interests and even shared, democratic values.

To conclude, we can say that the Arab democratic uprisings are facing two major challenges. The first one is a genuine transformation: the revolts have to effect a real change of regimes, not just a change within current regimes. The democratic process is hard and long and the democratic learning curve a steep one. The Arab people have taken the first step, but the counter-democratic forces are still in power in many states including Tunisia and Egypt. The second one is the role of the major external actors which try to influence the Arab democratic process in order to preserve a kind of right of control over the emerging democracies. Many external powers prefer a limited democracy in the Arab world: sufficient to overthrow authoritarianism and to calm popular fervor but limited to the extent of being truly independent from foreign influence.