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Whither the Arab Spring?



(Getty Images)

On January 25, 2012, tens of thousands Egyptians gather in Tahrir Square to mark the one-year anniversary of the revolution that toppled President Hosni Mubarak.

Government in the Arab World: Monarchy, Pan-Arab Socialism, and Islamism

By Paul McCaffrey

The Arab world is composed of twenty-two nations encompassing all of North Africa and much of the Middle East. The Arab people number over 360 million and while they share a common language, there is a surprising degree of diversity among them, whether in terms of nationality, culture, religion, economics, or politics. The Arab Spring uprisings of the past two years have brought renewed attention to the political landscape of the region, as long-reigning dictators and monarchs have endured vigorous challenges to their rule, with some, in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, succumbing to the pressure. Though generalizations about such a broad spectrum of countries can be difficult, the political regimes and movements operating in the Arab world today generally fall into three main categories—monarchy, pan-Arab socialism, and Islamism—with some examples embracing more hybrid approaches incorporating aspects of two subgroups. For the most part, however, these categories exist in opposition to one another, and the Arab Spring uprisings often developed when competing currents swept into one another.

Though these subdivisions seem simple on the surface, their expression is unique from country to country. Islamism in Iraq is different from Islamism in Tunisia; pan-Arab socialism in Syria is distinct from the Egyptian variety; and the Moroccan monarchy is not in all ways analogous to the Saudi form. Furthermore, in their individual application, there is often an underlying complexity. Frequently, the political structure, whatever its professed ideology, serves more sectarian purposes and illustrates the larger religious and cultural rifts within a country.

The lack of a democratic option is noteworthy, too, and may seem to support the cliché that the Arab world is “immune” to democracy. While this cliché holds true in some cases more than others, there are notable exceptions. Syria enjoyed a brief era of democratic governments soon after achieving independence, while Lebanon had a more robust and lengthy experience with a parliamentary system. In each country, however, democracy remained a sectarian affair, with political parties representing religious interests, until the system could no longer keep the peace and was overturned by a series of coups and a civil war, respectively. Sectarianism can also be seen in representative governments more recently established by the Palestinian Authority and Iraq. The major competition in the Palestinian Authority elections is between Hamas, an Islamist party, and Fatah, a secular, pan-Arab, and socialistic organization. Iraqi elections are similarly sectarian in outcome, with various Islamist parties and Kurdish organizations vying for influence. The results of post-Arab Spring elections in Egypt and Tunisia have resulted in victory for Islamist parties.

Democracy in the Arab world tends to reflect the sectarian makeup of the particular country and the struggle between Islamist and pan-Arab socialist approaches to government.

The political dimension is essential to understanding the Arab Spring phenomena, but it is not the only dimension. Demography also had an undeniable influence. One common trait shared by the various nations of the Arab world is a rapidly expanding population, with a demonstrable “youth bulge.” In many Arab countries, more than half of the people are under the age of thirty. Such circumstances have historically contributed to social upheaval, both in the Arab world and elsewhere. Compounding the problem is a largely stagnant economic climate. Vast numbers of unemployed young people constitute a destabilizing element in any society.

The monarchical category is especially prominent in the oil-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula, applying to Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain. In these states, the monarchies are absolute in nature. Whatever legislative structures are in place exercise little real power. Morocco and Jordan also have monarchies, but these are of the constitutional variety, so influential parliaments play prominent roles in affairs of state. In the early years of the post-colonial era, Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya each had monarchies as well, though pan-Arab socialist movements toppled them.

Of the nations that currently have the monarchical political structure, the only one to experience serious Arab Spring–related unrest is Bahrain, which at first glance, may seem an outlier. With the other Gulf oil monarchies, a small population coupled with vast oil wealth—or just vast oil wealth—was enough to ensure stability during the Arab Spring. Why was Bahrain the exception? As it turns out, a sizeable majority of Bahrain’s population subscribes to the Shia branch of the Islamic faith. The ruling Al-Khalifa family, on the other hand, is Sunni and, demonstrators contend, has favored fellow Sunnis at the expense of the Shia in distributing the wealth of the kingdom. Despite their majority status, the largely Shia protestors failed to overthrow the regime or persuade it to reform. Confronted by the demonstrations, the authorities instituted a brutal crackdown, and with Saudi assistance, stamped them out.

The Sunni-Shia divide that emerges in Bahrain is a common theme in the Arab Spring and in the larger context of Arab politics. Along with other religious schisms, it often influences the various Arab political institutions and movements, whether they are outwardly monarchical, pan-Arab, or Islamist. Over a thousand years old, the Sunni-Shia distinction has its origins in a dispute over the successor to the Prophet Muhammad. Sunnis believe that Abu Bakr, an advisor to Muhammad and the consensus choice among the Prophet’s companions, is the rightful heir. Shias maintain that Ali, the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law, is Muhammad’s true successor. In subsequent centuries, the religious and cultural practices of Sunnis and Shias have diverged, while the succession debate has evolved into larger disagreements about the nature of religious authority and the relationship between humanity and the divine.

Though an accurate breakdown is hard to come by, the vast majority of the Arab world is Sunni Muslim. Shia Arabs are the largest demographic in Iraq and Bahrain and make up sizeable minorities in Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and, through

the Alawite sect, Syria. The Arab world is not uniformly Muslim, however. Though Egypt, the Palestinian Territories, Syria, and Jordan are all predominantly Sunni, they do have notable Christian populations. Lebanon's population is around 40 percent Christian, the largest proportion in the Arab world.

An example of a hybrid regime, Saudi Arabia is ruled by an absolute monarchy, with members of the large royal family monopolizing the levers of wealth and power. It is also, however, a devoutly Muslim nation, one that contains Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in all of Islam; consequently, the Saudi monarchy has long embraced political Islamism. The form of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia and written into its legal code is Wahhabism, an especially austere and strict variety. Thanks to its vast oil wealth, Saudi Arabia has exported this sort of political Islamism to Pakistan, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

Aside from the protests and repression in Bahrain, the oil-rich Gulf monarchies avoided the worst of the Arab Spring disturbances. This suggests that oil wealth and an absence of major sectarian divisions had a palliative effect on potential resistance to the ruling order in each monarchy and helped preserve the peace. It also indicates that vast oil reserves alone may safeguard a regime, or at least a monarchy, from the threat of revolution.

The Libyan example contradicts these conclusions. In 1968, the Free Officers, led by Colonel Muammar Qaddafi, overthrew King Idris I. There was no sectarian motive to Qaddafi's coup. Then as now, Libya was around 99 percent Sunni Muslim. Forty-odd years later, with Libya's oil wealth and homogenous population still intact, Qaddafi himself was deposed. Facing an Arab Spring-inspired insurrection supported by foreign airpower, he could not maintain his position and was eventually killed by insurgents.

Qaddafi's regime, like the others that fell in the Arab Spring—Hosni Mubarak's Egypt and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's Tunisia—and one that may yet crumble—Bashar el-Assad's Syria—did not base their rule on heredity or religion but on more secular considerations. Mubarak, Qaddafi, Assad, and, to a lesser extent, Ben Ali, are all heirs of Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser and his ideology. Pan-Arab socialism—Nasserism and its close relative, the Baathism of Syria and Iraq—developed in the 1940s and 1950s as a response to the schisms within the Arab community and to the perceived humiliations of the colonial era.

As an ethos, Nasserism and other forms of Pan-Arab socialism make more sense in the abstract than in the actual, in word more than deed. There was and remains a unifying sense of Arab identity, of Arab nationalism. But as the structures of the colonial era were dismantled, the new institutions that replaced them ignored this impulse. Instead, artificial boundaries were imposed, creating fresh divisions among the Arab people on top of the old sectarian ones. The new governments were corrupt and ineffectual, the full extent of their incompetence illustrated by the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, when the outnumbered Israelis crushed the combined Arab armies. Pan-Arab socialism sought to reverse these outcomes. It brought about Arab unity by removing foreign and imperial influences, constructing socialist economies, and confronting Israel.

Pan-Arab socialism enjoyed some early successes. Upon coming to power in the early 1950s, Nasser eloquently championed the Arab poor, who had been variously ignored or exploited by their leaders for centuries. With his handling of the Suez Crisis in 1956, Nasser became a truly transcendent figure. But his domestic policies came up short. His pan-Arab unity projects failed. His brinkmanship with Israel led to one of the more crushing defeats in military history.

Nasser's successors in Egypt altered his doctrine, excising most of the socialism and much of the pan-Arabism. They retained his repressive security apparatus. As Hosni Mubarak's tenure entered its thirtieth year, Nasserism in Egypt was a spent force. Little remained but the regime's avowed secularism and its police-state cruelty. But as pan-Arab socialism stagnated, Egypt grew increasingly religious. The Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups expanded their influence and presented a challenge to the dictatorship. With major victories in the elections following Mubarak's downfall, the Islamist parties—and political Islam—have for now eclipsed Nasser's pan-Arabism and its offspring and risen to the forefront of Egyptian politics.

A similar dynamic may be at work in Tunisia. Following the demise of the corrupt and repressive but distinctly secular Ben Ali regime, the ensuing elections resulted in strong showings for Islamist parties. If this pattern holds, Islamists will perform well in the upcoming Libyan elections.

Though nominally a pan-Arab socialist state ruled by the Baath Party, Syria is a compelling example of how the pan-Arab designation can be subverted for sectarian ends—and how Arab Spring uprisings may, as in the Bahraini example, reflect underlying religious and ethnic tensions. Syria's population is largely Sunni Arab, but the country's governing elite is composed of Alawites, a historically marginalized community as well as a distinct minority in Syria. Throughout the forty years of the Assad dictatorship, opposition to the regime has developed mostly among Sunni Arabs and manifested itself as Muslim Brotherhood Islamism. The regime has responded with brutal repression, killing tens of thousands. While the Arab Spring demonstrations in Syria are not openly Islamist, they are centered in the predominantly Sunni Arab cities of Damascus and Homs, so it is likely, given democratic alternatives, Sunni Arabs in Syria would vote their faith, as they have in Egypt and Tunisia.

Whether Bashar el-Assad retains his power or falls like Mubarak, Qaddafi, and Ben Ali, the underlying lesson is that the Arab Spring uprisings, whatever their root causes—religious discrimination, economic stagnation, official corruption, repression, a youth bulge—their immediate outcome thus far is the downfall of secular, pan-Arab socialistic regimes and the empowerment of Islamist political parties. Political Islam is still very much a work in progress and its early expressions, in Turkey, for example, leave cause for hope, whereas the history of pan-Arab socialist regimes is largely one of grave excess compounded by failure.

The Long Revolt

By Rami G. Khouri
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The Arab world's wave of change was a century in the making. Why expect its effects to become clear in the space of months?

We are witnessing today the culmination of a century of Arab popular struggle for freedom and sovereignty. That struggle was interrupted by many decades of often illusory statehood under the reign of autocrats who were enthusiastically supported by foreign powers. Today's struggle is the single most significant movement of Arab citizens and citizenries since the modern Arab world was created in the early 20th century.

That world was born amid revolts against the region's Ottoman and European overlords. When the European colonial powers finally retreated, the Ottomans having been swept aside by their defeat in World War I, they left behind a collection of Arab countries they essentially had manufactured for their own convenience out of their particular dominions. Twenty-two nominally sovereign Arab states ultimately emerged, and they limped into the 21st century battered and tattered by a combination of forces: their own economic mismanagement and corruption; regional wars and occupations involving Israel, Iran, and recurring invasions by the United States and Britain; severe income disparities resulting from the misuse of oil and gas wealth; and a stunning record of sustained autocracy and authoritarianism unmatched by any other region of the world.

Now Arab countries finally are being born of their own volition rather than through the false-birth handicraft of audacious European officials. The momentous process that is under way today is so complex and was so long in the making that it is not surprising that we have a hard time finding a name for it. "Arab Spring" is the tag used in the West. "Revolution" (*thawra*) is the preferred name among those protesting and sometimes battling in the streets in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. In some countries people speak of their "intifada" (uprising), the name popularized by the two Palestinian intifadas against Israeli occupation. Others speak of a "citizen revolt," the "Arab Awakening," or the "Arab Renaissance."

Half a year after the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes that launched this revolt, two important patterns have emerged. First, there is a common set of basic material and political grievances that citizens in most Arab countries share. Second, each regime's response to the protests has been determined by the

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intersection of two factors: the nature and legitimacy of the regime itself and the intensity of popular grievances. This is why the region is marked by such a variety of revolts and regime responses. There have been two regime changes to date, while active warfare and low-intensity violence continue in a few countries. In others, the national leaders, perhaps feeling themselves on firmer ground, are attempting to mute demands for change with a combination of massive cash handouts to the hard-pressed populace and negotiations, or at least dialogue, with those demanding changes in how power is exercised and citizens are treated.

Understanding what is happening now and how things might evolve requires, above all, grasping the nature of the grievances that have caused people to go into the streets, knowing they risk death. For decades, the average Arab citizen suffered multiple hardships and injustices. These included rampant corruption, poor wages,

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a lack of jobs, low-quality education, occupation by foreign powers, security service abuses, and curbs on personal freedoms. By the 1990s, the Arab order could be defined as one of continuous wars and internal violence, increasingly militaristic and corrupt security states, and burgeoning disparities in citizen well-being as a small, wealthy minority became increasingly distanced from masses of lower-income and poor Arabs. Average people were willing to endure as long as they felt that the future held

out the hope of a better life for themselves or their children. From the 1930s to the late '80s, the future did indeed promise a better life for most Arabs. But the upward curve of promise flattened and in some cases reversed during the two decades before the current revolt erupted in Tunisia last December.

In Tunisia, Gallup surveys showed that the percentage of those who were “thriving” (a composite measure of well-being developed by the polling firm) fell by 10 points between 2008 and 2010. In Egypt, it fell by 17 points over a slightly longer period of time. (Last year, only 14 percent of Tunisians and 12 percent of Egyptians were classified as “thriving,” compared with 43 percent of Saudis and somewhat higher percentages of those in other Persian Gulf states.) At the same time, both countries had growing economies, which created a wealthy elite even as the majority of citizens felt that their prospects were declining. Last year, Gallup found that more than a quarter of all young people in Arab states wanted to emigrate—and the proportion reached more than 40 percent in Tunisia, Yemen, and other countries. Arabs’ confidence in the legitimacy of national elections was low. Dozens of other indicators affirm this picture of mass citizen discontent across the region, with the general exception of the wealthy Persian Gulf oil-producing states.

The Arabs who now challenge their governments share a common desire to achieve both personal and political goals. They want all the normal rights of citizenship, including meaningful voting rights, access to a credible judicial system, and freedom of the press. They want the ability to exercise their human faculties to read

and write as they wish, enjoy arts and culture without draconian censorship, discuss public issues, travel and invest as they see fit, wear the clothes and listen to the music they prefer, and participate in the world of ideas that helps shape their society as well as define their public policies.

When Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Tunisia last December, inspiring the Arab revolt, he was driven to his desperate gesture by a terrible combination of material want and homegrown political humiliation felt by Arabs across the region. The intensity of the resulting demonstrations for serious change and the speed with which they spread throughout the Arab world suggest that these national rebellions, and the common regional trend they represent, will not wither away or be permanently suppressed by police actions.

This revolt is very different from the upsurge of Arab nationalism in the 1950s and '60s, when young Arab states still being born were caught up in a mass emotional and political response to a stultifying combination of what many saw as Israeli and Western aggression. That period of Arab nationalism was perhaps the last gasp of the anticolonial struggle that charismatic leaders such as Egypt's Gamal Abdel Nasser tapped into so effectively. The mere idea of Arabs with shared identities, rights, and interests fighting for their sovereignty and building new countries electrified masses across the region for a fleeting decade, until the debacle of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war revealed the structural weaknesses of Arab nationalist regimes.

The current revolt is anchored much more solidly in the fierce determination of millions of citizens to live decent and normal lives, free of material desperation and political indignity. The revolt's intensity and broad scope also reflect the fact that it did not emerge from a vacuum. It is, rather, the culmination of decades of activism by scores of groups small and large that have struggled unsuccessfully for civil and political rights. Those battles erupted in many countries but did not achieve regional momentum, and consequently received little attention abroad. The challenges to the Arab order came from a variety of civil society initiatives, democracy and human rights movements, more specialized campaigns to promote the rights of women and workers, and thousands of individual writers and academics. Professional associations of lawyers, engineers, and doctors in many Arab countries have long fought for greater rights anchored in the rule of law, and business associations in recent years have also pushed for change, especially in education and the judiciary.

The Arab region enjoyed a brief spell of liberalization beginning in the late 1980s as a result of fallout from the Soviet Union's collapse and a serious economic crisis that brought widespread hardship and forced bankrupt authoritarian states to open up their systems enough to allow citizens to air their frustrations and grievances. Roughly between 1986 and 1992, Arabs in the tens of millions embraced the possibilities of a more open press and the ability to create political parties and civil society organizations. Flocking to vote and speak their minds, they forcefully expressed their long-pent-up demand for real citizenship.

Islamist movements emerged in the 1980s as the most important challengers of Arab state power, and in most cases they were beaten down by the state's security forces, their members jailed en masse or forced into exile. The important thing about

these movements—including the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan, Egypt, and Syria; Al-Nahda in Tunisia; Amal and Hezbollah in Lebanon; and the Islamic Salvation Front in Algeria—is that in almost every case they grew primarily on the strength of their status as local groups demanding more citizen rights and empowerment, better government, and less corruption, rather than their criticisms of the United States and Israel. Today's revolt is built on the same foundation, with demands centered on citizen rights and constitutional changes, while foreign-policy issues take, at least for now, a back seat.

One American scholar who has long studied Arab political economy, former American University of Beirut president and Princeton University professor John Waterbury, noted in a private communication some months ago, "Quiescence has never been a consistent feature of the Arab world. Citing only from memory, I note the following: cost of living riots in Casablanca, 1965; food riots in Egypt, 1977; the Hama massacres of 1982 in Syria; cost of living riots in Jordan, Sudan, Algeria in the late 1980s; the Shia uprising in Iraq in 1991; the long-smoldering Islamist insurrection in Algeria after 1991; Houthis and others fighting the regime in Yemen; civil war continuously in the Sudan since the early '80s; the Lebanese civil war, 1976–89; the Palestinians against the Israelis seemingly forever, and so on.

"We should not confuse police states with political docility. There have been at least three other civilian-led protest movements that led to real change, but not to lasting change. In 1964 and again in 1985 civilian demonstrations led to the downfalls of General [Ibrahim] Abboud and Jaafar Numeiry of the Sudan, leading to years of civilian government, until 1989 when General Omar Bashir seized power and remains in power. In the spring of 2005 a million mostly young Lebanese went to Martyrs' Square in Beirut and brought about the downfall of the Karami government and the withdrawal of Syrian military forces from Lebanon."

Egypt alone in recent years has witnessed the rise of the Kefaya movement, which challenged Mubarak family rule in the years before the election of 2005; the judges' movement for the rule of law; human rights and voters' rights movements that included brave pioneers such as Saad Eddin Ibrahim and the Ibn Khaldoun Center; the April 6 Movement, which emerged from the 2008 labor strikes; the vibrant opposition press led by the start-up newspaper *Al-Masry Al-Youm* and others; and thousands of young bloggers who spoke on the Web when they were not allowed to speak in public. Such determined activism for freedom, democracy, and the rule of law has occurred in almost every Arab country over the past two generations.

Some Arab countries are now moving toward radical change, while in others, citizens' democratic aspirations are frozen by the heavy hand of a ruling security state. New actors are emerging or reasserting themselves, including youth groups, formerly exiled or banned political parties, labor unions, private-sector-led political parties, and reform-oriented civil society organizations. Other actors, notably the military, Islamists, and traditional political parties, are repositioning themselves. The Arab political stage has now been repopulated with a rich array of new and reinvigorated actors. It will be some time before they sort themselves out, determining which will lead and which will play niche roles. Most Arab countries have not