THE ARAB ROAD TO UNCERTAIN DEMOCRACY

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Abstract. *The "Arab spring" recent uprisings have brought to the fore the possibility of implementing democratic reforms in the Arab world. However, this chance for change has started to fade after a few years, due to chronic complications of the ineradicable and never-ending cycle of political authoritarianism. Skimming over the experiences of some Arab revolutions proves that they have usually culminated with people going round in circles, and are mostly marked by quasi-endless violent confrontations due to their instantaneously eruption, without any plan and without clear-cut objectives. However, the Arab experience proves that short-term revolutions have functioned as a wake-up call for more than one nation, where people found themselves empowered to threaten the extension of ascendancy of any sublime authority. This wake-up call is in fact a call towards promoting intellectuality, and proves to be the starting point of a peaceful revolution that might overcome the authoritarianism of certain regimes and help the people of concerned countries in their strive towards real democracy. Knowledge is the key to power and power is the key to real change.*

Keywords: *democracy, Arab Spring, intellectuality, revolution, peace.*

Following the passing away of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia, the Arab world has indulged in a defining moment that may pave the way for realizing the dream of promoting democracy in its countries. This dream has been cherished by almost all Arab people, who aspire to a decent life wherein they can enjoy their basic human rights – such as freedom, equality and dignity. However, realizing this dream of radical transition in the Arab world has faced chronic complications due to the ineradicable and never-ending cycle of regimes' authoritarianism.

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Despite the fact that these revolutions have succeeded in surpassing the utmost horizons of people's expectations and resulted in dislodging some of the most notoriously authoritarian Arab leaders, the transition to democracy has not been an easy path.

Not surprisingly, the establishment of a democratic society requires long-term perspectives and entails many sacrifices. As Martin Luther King declared in one of his famous speeches: "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."[1]

The sacrifices made in the Arab revolutions, however, seem to be superfluous and are conducted in a manner that has yielded undetected results. The experience of the Tunisian revolution, for example, has been rated as a quasi-successful uprising. This is actually the case, since the toppling of Ben Ali was achieved easily and unexpectedly, without much collateral damage and violence – unlike other Arab countries, such as Egypt, Yemen and Syria, among others, which have gone through torturing moments of disaster and human suffering in their quest for securing an easy pathway towards progress and democracy.

Skimming the Arab Spring

The special case of the Tunisian path towards democracy, also known as the Jasmin revolution, might stem from the fact that "the civilians (rather than the military) are leading the transition effort; the Islamists are more moderate, and the elite are relatively united (rather than fragmented)."[2]

However, this quasi-success of the Jasmin revolution does not suggest that "the Tunisian path went without problems or it has reached the point of complete success."[3] After Ben Ali's absconding, the first democratically – elected government led by the Islamist party, "Ennahda", knew a moment of irritation, especially after the return of Ben Ali's regime to the field of politics through the establishment of their secular-leaning party named "Nidae Tunis." The establishment of this party was set under the euphemism of the "failure" of Ennahda's governance.

The election of Beji Caid Essebsi – known for his allegiance to prior Tunisian presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali – as president of Tunisia questions the "success" of the Jasmin revolution, thereby impeding the Tunisian journey towards substantial democracy and aborting its peoples' dream to enjoy their basic global human rights.

On the other side of the coin, the Egyptian revolution opted for a different experience in order to work out its unique pathway towards social justice and dignity. Unlike the Tunisian revolution, which was stirred by civilians, the Egyptian one was different in having the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces leading the path towards an Egyptian democratic transition.

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[1] Martin Luther King, *Words of Martin Luther King*, New York, Newmarket Press, 1983, p. 59.
[2] Aminand Saikal and Amitav Acharya, *Democracy and Reform in the Middle East and Asia: Social Protest and Authoritarian Rule after the Arab Spring*, London, I.B. Tauris, 2014, p. 8.
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 18.

The interference of the army was first perceived as a windfall for such a revolution. However, the thorniest moment started less than a year after, when a civilian was elected as president of Egypt; thus auguring the beginning of an era in total contrast to the past, with its marked military authoritarian dominance over Egyptian presidency since 1953, when Lieutenant General Mohammed Naguib was appointed as Egypt's first president.

Revisiting the history of Mohammed Naguib's coming to power recalls another identical experience, this time for Mohammed Morssi. That is, the presidency of Naguib was precisely that point in Egyptian history which ended the authority of king Farouk, as an outcome of the 1952 revolution led by the Free Officers movement.

However, after one year of this so-called democratic transition, Colonel Jamel Abdelnasser, who was nominated later as the second president of Egypt, overthrew president Naguib and put him under house arrest pending his release until Anwar Sadat came to power in 1972. This event recalls an identical experience of late Egyptian president, Mohammed Morssi, who was the first democratically elected civilian in Egypt's first free election, as many countries, media outlets and political officials have openly declared.

After the ousting of Hosni Mubarak, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces held the responsibility for a transitional arrangement until elections were held. During this period, the Law of Political Parties was created as a step towards the liberation of political party formation[4]. However, issuing this law was done with the purpose of paving the way for the Egyptian Armed Forces to cling to power, thus leaving no room for civilians to partake in political life, except through minor chances of participation in the structure of political parties. In fact, there was a slippery term in such a law that was cleverly used against President Mohammed Morsi.

As a result, Mohammed Morsi, along with his political party, were charged with launching insurgent terrorist operations all over Egypt. This claim resulted in deposing and arresting president Morsi in a military coup less than one year after the start of his presidential experience, thus repeating the scenario already used with Mohammed Naguib. This shift in events culminated in announcing the nomination of Abdel Al Fatah el-Sisi as president of Egypt and thus asserting the continuity of military sovereignty.

On the other side, the revolution in Libya was marked by violent confrontations between Gaddafi's regime and the protesters who had formed their "government faction". The Libyan revolution, however, was met with complete solidarity both from the inside and the outside, due to Gadhafi's autocracy, since:

"He had rejected western democracy by "shelving the constitution, abolishing political parties, banning independent media outlets, and undermining civil society organizations. He instead used his own ideology, as outlined in the Green Book, to restructure state institutions. … The system left a power vacuum at the top, allowing Gaddafi to rule without any checks and balances. Although he had no

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[4] *Ibidem*, p. 22.

official post as a head of state, he took on absolute power without being elected or accountable to anybody."[5]

These revolutions have put an end to the firmly long-established era of Gadhafi. However, like any other revolutions, "the fairest day after a bad emperor", to use Tacitus' adage, "is the first."[6] The challenge Libyan people faced was epitomized in the transition from Gadhafi's tyrannical regime toward the establishment of a democratic society. However, political conflicts overwhelm the scene of such transitions, in order to serve the politicians' interests rather than engage in serious and altruistic attempts to work for the good of all Libyans, without exception. These conflicts have been conducive to continuous street violence and civil wars due to an increase of armed militias. This fact questions the ability of people in positions of power to build a safe bridge towards democracy.

The Crisis of the Arab Spring

Many factors have contributed to the deviation of the Arab journey from a path towards democracy to a road lost amidst peoples' greedy and self-opinionated pursuits. Stirring a revolution without careful planning proves to be the main factor in its total failure. Most Arab revolutions, if not all of them, have erupted instantaneously, without any plan or clear-cut objectives.

The reason behind such eruptions was, at first, socially and economically driven, but later reached an apex in revolt against the sublime authorities. In fact, an absence of intellectuals' role has negatively affected the chance of Arab societies to safely land in the realm of democracy. The French experience of democracy, for example, was brought about by the presence of intellectuals. In spite of the quasi-success of its revolution, the presence of intellectual influences in France was the chief marker in its historical development.

For example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who died before the French revolution, was an influential figure, labeled as the "Father of the French Revolution." His writings "inspired the leaders of the French Revolution"[7] through introducing those premises which regulated and strengthened the bonds between society and the individual. The absence of this condition in the Arab spring has hindered the safe monitoring of its revolutions, which were marked by a lack of premeditation. To that effect, it would have been possible for the intelligentsia to leave its imprint upon revolutions that could have radically been changed for better. However, before assuming such a claim, we should clearly be able to identify who the true intellectuals are, or who can be described as such. For the Italian Philosopher, Antonio Gramsci, there are two types of intellectuals: traditional

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[5] Mohamed A. El-Khawas, "Libya's Revolution: A Transformative Year," in *The Arab Spring and Arab Thaw: Unfinished Revolutions and the Quest for Democracy*, ed. John Davis, Surrey, Ashgate Publishing, 2013, p. 61.

[6] Tacitus, *The Historie*, trad. Clifford H. Moore, Cambridge, Mass., Cambridge University Press, 1962, p. 83.

[7] See "Jean-Jacques Rousseau," *Encyclopædia Britannica Online.* Encyclopædia Britannica Inc., 2015; <http://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Jacques-Rousseau>. Accessed at December 1, 2015.

intellectuals and organic ones. The first type embraces "teachers, priests, and administrators, who continue to do the same thing from generation to generation."[8] The second type is what Gramsci defines as: "the capitalist entrepreneur who creates, alongside himself, the industrial technician, the specialist in political economy, the organizer of a new culture, of a new legal system, etc."[9] This second type, for Gramsci, is strenuously engaged in society and "constantly struggle to change minds and expand markets … [and] are always on the move, on the make,"[10] while on the contrary, he considers that "teachers and priests… seem more or less to remain in place, doing the same kind of work year in, year out."[11] In this sense, the struggle to change minds remains the real task of authentic intellectuals. The task of change is "essential to the intentional production of the future from and by the present, based on its knowledge of itself and its past."[12]

Additionally, the lack of trust among politicians themselves is another causative factor that has led to the failure of the Arab spring. This factor has overwhelmed the subsequent deposing of absolutist presidents in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. This disagreement among the new reformers has delayed the inauguration of a promotion of democracy, and it has, therefore, displayed different contradictions and ambiguities embedded in obstacles that were deliberately set in its path, as a preparation for the return of old regimes and for providing protection to their main players, as in the case of Mubarak in Egypt. In this sense, while some reformers have been attempting to bring people together upon a democratic scene, the supporters of the old regimes, who object to this Arab reorganization, have increased the rift between the haves and have-nots together with the do's and don'ts, thereby prompting the people to despise and reject any new amendments made by the newcomers to power.

Over and above that, media has played an essential role both in initiating the spark of Arab revolutions, and in engendering their failure. No one can deny the important role of Facebook, Twitter and other social media in the unsettlement and toppling of authoritarian regimes. However, this outlet was also a hindrance for the success of these uprisings. Historically speaking, the Free Officers who deposed King Farouk in the Egyptian Revolution of 1952 were aware of the effectiveness of media in controlling nonprofessionals.

"They struck late at night, taking control of the radio networks and the main military bases. They moved hastily, even slightly before they felt entirely confident of their success, conscious that King Farouk and his followers were gathering information about them and preparing to move to stymie their plans. Over Radio

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[8] Edward Said, *Representations of Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 4.

[9] Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*, translation by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, New York, International Publishers, 1971, p. 4.

[10] Edward Said, *Representations of Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, New York, Vintage Books, 1994, p. 4.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 4.

[12] *Ibidem*, p. 85.

Cairo, Anwar al-Sadat, one of the Free Officers, announced the coup and asserted that the military were seizing power in order to transform Egyptian society."[13]

In the same manner, Jamal Abdel Nasser employed Radio Cairo as an effective means for ensuring success in his leadership career: "Employing Radio Cairo, which broadcast his message of Egyptian leadership throughout the entire Arab world, he created many enemies, but won the hearts and minds of the young, well-educated Arab progressives."[14] In the same manner, the 2013 coup d'état held by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt conducted a campaign of restricting media channels and arresting any journalists supporting Morsi. Many channels were shut down because of their independent news coverage and non-state-run reportages – like Aljazeera Live Egypt; thus allowing only news companies supporting the sudden and forcible overthrow of Morsi's legitimacy to broadcast. These Egyptian channels have increased their coverage, as a way of convincing ordinary people to accept the "new path" drawn by the Egyptian military generals.

Furthermore, the question of people's safety remains one of the factors contributing to the crisis of the Arab spring. Governing through fear is an old strategy, adopted by most authoritarian regimes in order to clinch their control over their populace. Increasingly, the level of threat and fear forces the populace to approve of the tyrannous system as a preferable alternative, in order to guarantee their safety.

The Syrian experience has become a nightmare for every person aspiring towards a decent life. One consequence of this nightmare is the people's hesitancy to support any further change that might be demanded by some activists; no one wants to experience this predicament all over again. Unfortunately, such nightmares have culminated in the worst possible conditions, in that "children and women form more than 75% of the refugees, who live under harsh conditions, outside camps. Syrians seek to fulfill their basic needs such as security, nourishment, sheltering and health, rather than pursuing a decent life."[15]

Different regimes have opted for different methods in order to raise the level of fear among their peoples. Such fear – based policies are known to be carried out in Egypt by *Baltagia* and in Syria by *Chebbiha*. These regimes have resorted to spreading bullyboys amongst the people, waging bloody civil wars, increasing criminal rates, mugging people in broad daylight, etc. In addition to this, both the *Baltagia* and the *Chebbiha* augment their fear policy by the creation of armed groups establishing themselves as "Islamists"; another regretful condition that concerns the security of unarmed civilians.

The appearance of these "terrorist groups" makes people pay no heed to the atrocity of their regimes. Therefore, the question of security pushes people to become gentle, docile citizens, content with pampering themselves with what the state provides and yelling patriotic mottos in favor of their regimes.

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[13] Robert L.Tignor, *Egypt: A Short History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. 256.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 260.
[15] Oytun Orhan, "The Situation of Syrian Refugees in the Neighboring Countries, Findings, Conclusions and Recommendations," *Orsam*, No. 189, Apr. 2014, p. 7.

More importantly, the ideological conflict in the Arab world has strongly contributed to the Arab spring crystallization. This conflict remains one of the common traumatic conditions among all Arab revolutions because it divides society into binary oppositions, to use Edward Said's words – drawing separations between Islamist and secular and Shi and Sunni social groups. These binaries have derived the path of revolution towards constant struggle, thus delaying and even ignoring any social rehabilitation.

This constant struggle serves the interests of people who already have power over both the military forces and the market economy. In this sense, overcoming these ideologies is the first step towards the construction of a powerful society, with no tribulation. After all, Arab revolutions "were fueled by poverty, unemployment and lack of economic opportunity" (Malik and Awadallah, 2013: 296) and ideologies are not preferable repasts for people's breakfast, luncheon and dinner. Economic promotion, in this sense, remains the first step towards a "certain" democracy.

Towards a Certain Democracy

Introducing this melancholy scrutiny of the Arab spring does not imply that the phenomenon itself amounted to nothing. Regardless of the continuity of old regimes in some countries, these short-term revolutions have functioned as a wake-up call for a vast majority of the people, enabling them to threaten the extension of ascendancy of the sublime authority. People now recognize their importance in relation to their societies.

In this sense, promoting their basic rights takes precedence over the will of any current or potential governors, who might anticipate any new uprisings that might erupt, leading to radical change. Providing a decent life does not lie beyond the bounds of possibility, since the Arab world is blessed with natural resources and an intersecting geography enabling an economic competitiveness which might eventually lead to the fulfillment of democracy.

However, in times of tension and ideological conflict, people require, for the moment, intellectual promotion rather than the launching of aggressive revolutions. The Arab tyrannical regimes prove to be long-lasting powers inside their unbounded networks, controlling every aspect of potentiality, and dominating their societies economically, militarily, and politically; thus, the leaders could be changed but the system would never change.

Promoting intellectuality is, in fact, a peaceful revolution that might overcome the authoritarianism of certain regimes and bring their countries into the realm of democracy. Knowledge is the key to power and power is the key to real change. This change is a personal product, and every human being is responsible for his/her development, as Italian thinker Antonio Gramsci believes; "all men are intellectuals, one could therefore say: but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals."[16]

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[16] Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks: Selections*, Translations by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith, New York, International Publishers, 1971, p. 9.

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