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Whither the Arab Spring? 1989 or 1848?

Robert Springborg

The dramatic thawing of the Cold War at the end of the 1980s accompanied by the rapid democratisation of Eastern Europe served as inspiration and model for political transitions in other settings. Now the Arab world, the securitisation of which has kept it frozen in what amounts to a regional cold war long after the global prototype ended, may be entering its springtime of political freedom. Tunisia's 'Jasmine' and Egypt's 'Midan al Tahrir' Revolutions chased established autocrats from power, thus making possible new domestic political orders and substantial reorientations of foreign policies. Imitative uprisings in Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria have thus far resulted in widespread violence, regime retrenchments and even foreign interventions, although prospects do remain for more positive outcomes. Intermittent demonstrations in various other Arab countries, including Morocco, Algeria, Oman, Jordan and Iraq, have typically been met with limited political reforms and promises of more to come. So the region is definitely in political ferment, but whether that presages transitions to democracy *à la* Eastern Europe in 1989, or revanchist reconsolidations reminiscent of those that overwhelmed the 1848 liberal nationalist movements in Western Europe, remains to be seen.

A quick comparison of political conditions in today's Arab world to those that obtained in Eastern Europe in 1989 suggests that democratic transitions in the Middle East will face more substantial obstacles than they did in Poland, Hungary, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and so on. The broader contexts of 1989 were more favourable and the capacities of the individual countries more substantial than those of today's Arab world. As for the contexts of 1989, they included the end of Soviet occupation, the expansion of the Western security umbrella, promised membership in the European Union plus support for changes required to achieve that, and a region wide, nearly unquestioning embrace of democracy and market-based economies. The ubiquitous, once powerful communist thesis stimulated in Hegelian fashion its pro-Western, democratic antithesis. The receding tide of Russian influence and rising tide of the Western Alliance helped propel even the

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least seaworthy ships of state of the old Soviet Union in the same direction, albeit at different speeds.

There are no similar, dramatic and powerful external forces currently pushing Arab states toward democracy and market capitalism. No Hegelian dialectic is propelling all Arab states in a westward ideological direction because most have not recently been occupied by a hegemonic, brutal power, neighbouring or otherwise. American and European security concerns, including access to oil, control of immigration, combating terrorism, and a regional balance of power that favours pro-Western regimes, remain in place. It is precisely those concerns that have heretofore caused the Western powers to support authoritarian governments, as suggested by their as yet cautious, sometimes reluctant embrace or even outright rejection of demands by protestors for those powers to support reform or depart. Since Arab democracy is as yet untested, it is by definition an unknown quantity. The West is understandably reluctant to risk its security interests in such uncertain circumstances, especially in so vital a region where radical ideologies of nationalism and Islamism remain prevalent, and notions of a clash of civilisations are entertained by serious actors on both sides. The European Union is not offering the carrot of full membership as an incentive for and roadmap to reform.

As for the economic and political capacities of the Arab states, on average they are substantially less than were those of Eastern European countries some two decades ago. Unemployment rates are higher, industrial transformations and human resource development less progressed, baskets of exports less diverse and dependence upon foreign assistance greater than was the case in Eastern Europe. Amazingly enough, Arab governments are almost as large proportionately to the economies and societies they are ruling, and as inefficient, as were the communist ones of the old Eastern Europe. Arab authoritarianism has probably also been more efficient at extirpating autonomous components of civil society than were at least such Eastern European countries as Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Hungary, where labour unions, church and civic organisations were sufficiently powerful and autonomous to challenge communist rule once it weakened, and then to provide foundations for political society when communism collapsed. As for concurrence on the political economy model that should be adopted in preference to the status quo, again the Arab world compares unfavourably. Whereas Eastern Europe envisioned only one alternative, for the Arabs the ideal alternatives include widely varying models, ranging from Islamic theocracies to liberal democracies for political systems, and from nationalist, quasi-autarchic to globalised, free enterprise economies.

Given the comparatively unfavourable context in which the Arab Spring has blossomed, as well as the more limited capacities of Arab states and less consensus on their future form, it is necessarily more difficult to predict their future than it was that of Eastern Europe in say 1990. Back then many Eastern European states

appeared headed in the same direction and it could be reasonably assumed that in due course the laggards would fall in behind the leaders, as indeed they all ultimately did. It would take a brave and foolish man to predict such a relatively happy and uniform outcome for the Arab world. Far more likely is that individual Arab states will go their own ways, some embracing relatively liberal new orders, others reinforcing old authoritarian ones. Neither 1848 or 1989 outcomes can be entirely discarded, as authoritarianism could be reasserted across the region, or reform could gain a second wind and sweep away even the most recalcitrant of the Arab authoritarian orders.

It is beyond the scope of this article to assess the prospects for each and every one of the Arab states, or even for the main categories of them. Instead, some effort to assess future prospects will be undertaken by concentrating primarily on Egypt and secondarily on Tunisia. Thus far, these two countries remain the only ones in which incumbent rulers have been displaced and serious political reforms embarked upon, so their experiences necessarily shed more light on the challenges and prospects for reform across the Arab world, at least once it has commenced. Moreover, Egypt, as the traditional trend setter and model for the Arab world, with far and away its largest population, has the greatest potential to impact the other Arab states, so it deserves particular attention.

Tunisia

The broader context is more supportive of reform in Tunisia than in any other Arab state. Relations between it and Western powers have traditionally been less securitised than is the case with countries to the east or west. Lacking oil, not substantially threatened by Islamist inspired terrorism, distant from the Arab conflict with Israel, and having a relatively small, comparatively westernised population which until 2011 was not seeking in large numbers to enter Europe illegally, Tunisia was viewed as a special Arab case and one whose economic development could serve as a model for others. The EU provided more assistance to Tunisia on a per capita basis than any other Arab state. Even the enthusiastic embrace of the Ben Ali regime, especially by the French but also by the Americans, was abandoned within days of the start of demonstrations in December 2010. The security stakes were simply not large enough for Western powers to stand by the discredited dictator. In Tunisia, chances could be taken for democracy precisely because the risks seemed so small. Even if things went awry, only the country's ten million inhabitants would really be impacted – not Western security. Similarly, no Arab country saw its vital interests at stake as a result of a potential democratisation in Tunisia. The US also took heart from the fact that it had trained and equipped the comparatively small 50,000 strong Tunisian military, which it had helped convert into a professional force. So the broader contexts of relations both with its neighbours and more distant powers

favoured reformers from the outset, who, assisted by the military, managed to jettison Ben Ali and his entourage and to at least temporarily neutralise the more vicious, French trained security forces.

But context is not everything, as Tunisia quickly discovered. Indigenous capacities for reform become vital once the opportunity for real change is at hand. Despite its comparatively well developed human resources and a politically benign military eager to foster democracy, Tunisia's reformers have thus far not been able to consolidate their gains. Security forces, although weakened, still lurk in the background, apparently working to undermine progress and create sympathy for a return to something like the old order. The flight of at least 25,000 Tunisians in leaky boats to Italy have frightened and divided much of migration-wary Europe, undermining support there for the Tunisian democratic spring. Having been pulverised by Ben Ali's authoritarianism, civil society has thus far been unable to generate the more inclusive political coalitions necessary to manage the diverse tasks of democratisation, key of which is securing agreement on the basic rules of political contestation through the drafting of a constitution and supportive laws. Overshadowing the entire process is Islamism, as the political role in a democracy of *al Nahda* and other Islamist groupings has yet to be determined. So the very character of the future polity, society and economy – whether liberal and secular or Islamist and at least partially theocratic – is at issue, rendering problematic agreement on the basic rules of the political road. Division among reformers and delay of the reform process endangers democratisation, in part because indecision exacerbates economic uncertainty and decline. So Tunisia could fail to capitalise on the uniquely benign environment in which its reforms were launched because its political capacities are unequal to the task of building a new, non-authoritarian political order.

Egypt

Unlike Tunisia, Egypt has numerous attributes that cause external actors to seek to securitise relations with it. Neighbouring Gaza and posing the largest military threat to the Jewish state, Egypt is absolutely central to the Arab conflict with Israel. As the largest, most powerful Arab state it is also vital to Arab efforts, backed by the West, to contain Iran. It serves as the logistical bridge for the West to both the Gulf and central Africa. The Suez Canal is one of the world's most vital waterways, especially as regards oil transport. Egypt is now the world's sixth largest exporter of natural gas. Were even a small portion of its 84 million inhabitants to take to the boats in an effort to reach the northern shore of the Mediterranean, Europe would face a far larger human wave than any it has had to deal with thus far. Islamism was born and bred in Egypt and mounted a major insurrection as recently as the 1990s, after having killed a sitting president. It is not surprising,

therefore, that the core of external patrons' relations with Egypt, whether formerly England and then the Soviet Union or now the United States, has invariably been security concerns. Dealings with individuals and institutions responsible for projecting Egypt's power abroad and maintaining order at home have thus taken precedence for external actors in their bilateral relationships with Cairo. From colonial times until the present day, democratisation has always been viewed by Egypt's patron as a potential threat to its security interests, and so has invariably been approached in a cautious, tentative fashion, if at all.

The US embraced the Midan al Tahrir Revolution, hence the removal from power of President Mubarak and his family, precisely because this seemed the best strategy to protect its security interests. Confident that its long-standing role as tutor to the Egyptian military, including provision of equipment, training, and logistical and maintenance support, would preserve the bilateral relationship and that the military would be a stronger political pillar once the failing and unpopular President Mubarak was jettisoned, Washington had little difficulty presenting its support for change as sincere. But its sincerity was limited to professions of need for change, not necessarily for democratisation. Even during the tumultuous events, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton assured the military that the US annual largesse of USD 1.3 billion would continue. The US tacitly endorsed the military's seizure of power on 10-11 February and has since refrained from providing support for any efforts to subject the military to civilian control. Egypt's civilian democratisers thus confront a ruling military that is confident of its foreign backing, hence of its abilities to control the rate and extent of political change. The context is thus not one favourable to a thoroughgoing democratisation. Egypt's Western 'friends', most notably the US, are content with the status quo of a military guided, limited political opening. They would be apprehensive of anything more adventuresome. And Egypt's most powerful regional ally, Saudi Arabia, more than shares this view. Indeed, the Saudis preferred to back President Mubarak to the hilt, making no concessions whatsoever to the Midan al Tahrir revolutionaries and now seem to bitterly resent even this American compromise. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, if the Saudis throw their considerable weight into derailing the reform process.

Just as the potential democratisation of Egypt is constrained by contextual factors, so it faces the challenge posed by internal capacities that are limited compared to the magnitude of the tasks at hand. Residues of the authoritarian state have yet to be swept away. The military remains intact, with its already expansive political and economic roles further broadened. It has neutralised the General Intelligence Agency, which President Mubarak, working through General Omar Suleiman, used as one counterbalance, and brought under its control the sprawling security and police services of the Ministry of Interior. The much dreaded State Security Investigations has been dissolved, replaced by the

National Security Agency, whose top personnel were recruited under the military's supervision. The military has extended its surveillance and control of civilian political activists and expanded the use of its own court system to try alleged wrongdoers, sometimes handing down guilty verdicts in trials lasting but a few minutes. By June 2011, the military is reported to have incarcerated some 7,000 protesters. Although the National Democratic Party (NDP) has been dissolved, the structural foundations upon which it long rested remain intact. Those foundations include the roles of several key ministries in distributing patronage to appropriate constituencies and providing employees to demonstrate, vote and in other ways serve the inheritors of the NDP largesse; virtually the entirety of the local government structure, including its elected councils of whose 56,000 or so members are, with the exception of a few hundred, all from the NDP; its networks within universities, media outlets and other public bodies; and interlocking relationships between former NDP activists and security and intelligence agents with whom they have long worked. Only the presidency has been removed from the backbone of the authoritarian state. The other key elements – the military, security services, the single party, and elements of the executive administration – have either been strengthened (in the case of the military) or decapitated, with their bodies either being brought under the military or remaining intact and independent, available for use by a successor chosen by the military. The ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has turned a deaf ear to ongoing protests, demonstrations and strikes by members of unions and professional syndicates, academics, government employees and others who are demanding removal of the vestiges of the authoritarian state in their particular professions and workplaces.

In the face of this residual power of the preceding authoritarian state, Egypt's nascent civil and political societies appear weak and divided. The 'Facebook generation' that launched the uprising on 25 January and which more or less steered it through the tumult that followed, has yet to create an organisation that can serve as a significant political party to contest the parliamentary elections scheduled for September. Activists are divided not only in their organisational and party preferences, but also as to whether they should even be seeking to form or support institutionalised political parties. In the meantime, the Muslim Brotherhood has launched its own party and a variety of Islamists, ranging from Salifis to former insurrectionists grouped within the Gama'a Islamiyya, including the assassins of Sadat, have entered the political fray. So while the Islamists are numerous, they too are divided. Divisions between secularists and Islamists are becoming more profound, further aggravated as they have been by inter-communal tensions and violence between Muslims and Copts. The greater the gaps between secularists and Islamists, Copts and Muslims, the harder it becomes for nascent coalitions of political activists to bridge them within broadly based representative political institutions. Questions over the constitutional and legal roles of Islam are

becoming ever more sensitive as the time for drafting a permanent constitution, which is scheduled to occur after the parliamentary election, draws nearer.

In the meantime the political partylets that served as democratic window dressing in the *ancien regime*, slowly wilt away. Among the presently active political *dramatis personae*, the three actors which appear to be strongest and indeed, acting in concert, are the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the entire military that it commands, the administrative and party residues of the Mubarak regime, and the core of the Muslim Brotherhood, which gives various indications of believing that it will serve as the electoral and broader political arm of the military. Whether that is indeed the intent of Field Marshal General Muhammad Husayn Tantawi and his officer colleagues is unclear and even if it is, there is no guarantee that the plan can be implemented. But what is clear at this stage is that Egypt's civil and political societies remain weak and divided and that they are facing the still well organised, entrenched legacies of the authoritarian state.

The economic and social underpinnings for robust participatory organisations are also inadequate. The very slow rate of economic development and profoundly inadequate industrialisation have left Egypt with a weak middle class sandwiched between a vast number of impoverished and marginally employed peasants, and a relative handful of millionaires. The standard indicator of this essentially bimodal class distribution is that 40 percent of the population lives on less than USD2 per day, a proportion that remained unchanged during the years of rapid economic growth from 2004 to 2008 and has probably recently increased. Egypt's rural population declined proportionately until 1986, at which point it began to increase, now reaching some 53 per cent of the total. This reversal of urbanisation results from the lack of urban, that is to say modern, employment opportunities. And rapid urbanisation is positively correlated with democratisation, reflecting as it does both economic growth and broader political awareness and opportunities. More than three quarters of new jobs are in the informal sector, meaning that job holders have no security of tenure, to say nothing of no pensions and low remuneration. Egypt's proportion of high tech exports, a fraction of one percent, is among the lowest in lower middle income countries. Tunisia's, for example, is above 5 percent. Labour productivity has stagnated in Egypt, as has real GDP per capita.

The bulk of Egypt's population, in sum, has little if any economic security. About half face real hardship. It is hardly surprising that political interest as revealed by the World Value Surveys, for example, is concentrated on material concerns rather than issues of process, such as free and fair elections. Resentment of the wealthy provides fertile grounds for economic populism combined with political authoritarianism, the recipe that Nasser followed to perfection. The temptation must be strong for Egypt's present military rulers to copy this recipe for the country's economic and political futures. Fear of them doing so is

now stimulating further capital flight and discouraging both foreign and local investment, thereby exacerbating an already severe economic crisis. Democracy flourishes in tandem with the promise of improved economic circumstances, not in conditions of growing hardship. That hardship is particularly menacing now in Egypt, where rapid inflation of food prices has dire consequences for the poverty afflicted, who spend about one half of their family incomes on food. How the globalised Facebook generation can convince large numbers of struggling Egyptians that their economic needs and demands can be addressed more effectively through democratic institutions than through access to patronage in an authoritarian system, remains to be seen.

Conclusion

The poster children of the Arab Spring, Tunisia and Egypt, do not seem well equipped to imitate the success of Eastern European countries following the collapse of communism. The context in which Egyptian reformers are seeking to democratise their country is not nearly as conducive as was that in say Poland, largely because the security concerns of global and regional powers are thought by them to be better served by at best a very cautious, tentative democratic transition. Tunisia enjoys a much more favourable context in that democratisation carries fewer security risks for the country's external friends. But in both countries, indigenous capacities to democratise are not robust. In Egypt in particular, the residue of the *ancien regime* combined with the inhospitable economic substructure render the tasks of democratisers truly Promethean. And since the prospects for democracy are probably better in these two countries than elsewhere in the Arab world, the Arab Spring of 2011 will probably prove to be more akin to the 1848 failed revolutions than to the democratic transitions set in motion by the crumbling of the Soviet Union in 1989.