

Challenging success or failure: Democratization an the historical contextualization of the Arab Spring

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Abstract

This paper seeks to challenge the idea that the 'Arab Spring' can be interpreted within a 'success or failure' paradigm. It argues that such analyses are devoid of historical contextualization, divorcing the 'Arab Spring' from wider post Cold War developments and trends. It suggest that historical contextualization coupled with an appreciation of the role played by democratization allows for not only a more nuanced reading of what the Arab spring was, but also a more optimistic awareness of what it continues to be.

The 'failure' of the 'Arab Spring'

When Richard Nixon visited China in 1972 he asked the Chinese Premier, Zhou Enlai, what he thought of the French Revolution, to which he allegedly responded, "its is too early to say". Putting aside the accuracy of this interchange¹ this level of historical sensitivity and appreciation of the 'long term' is quite often absent from analyses of the so-called 'Arab Spring'. Within this 'success or failure' paradigm, success would supposedly entail that a post-revolutionary regime upholds respect for human rights, freedom of speech and religion, freedom of political parties and expression of all of these things in free and democratic elections – in short a democratic transition from autocracy. When judged by these measures it is reasonable to say that the 'Arab Spring' has been a rather dismal failure, indeed even the term 'Arab Spring', which did not emerge from the Arab World but was applied by outside

¹ Zhou Enlai was in fact speaking with reference to civil unrest in France in 1968, not the revolution of 1789.

commentators, lent itself to terms such as ‘Islamist Winter’ which assisted in forming a misleading and patently ahistorical reading of events and generated undue and underserved pessimism. Initial interpretations of events saw them as the beginning of a domino effect that would usher the elusive ‘Third Wave’ of democratization and mark an end to the authoritarian resilience that thus far had characterized the region. This has patently not happened and the benefit three years hindsight has further complicated the picture due in part to the varying shades of progress on display in individual countries which makes an overall assessment of events elusive.

When viewed with retrospective sobriety, what is apparent is that the vast majority of countries in the region were largely unaffected. Out of nineteen Arab countries only 6 (roughly 1/3) experienced regime-threatening levels of mass protests (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain and Libya) and only 1/5 saw regime change. Syria’s experience with the ‘Arab Spring’ saw it gradually slide into a protracted and brutal civil war that has ignited the sectarian tensions in the region and spawned an abject, and increasingly global, humanitarian crisis. The jihadist contingent in the opposition has also made the international community much more wary of providing the type of advanced weaponry capable of breaking the current stalemate on the battlefield, suggesting that it may drag on for months, if not years to come.

In Egypt, the epicenter of the Arab World, the July 4th coup in Egypt, which deposed the country’s first democratically elected leader, was little less than a democratic U-turn, even for those who acknowledged Mr. Morsi’s many flaws and missteps in office. The impact on the now criminalized Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and Islamism more generally is less clear but what is certain is that some of Islamism’s most radical manifestations were forged under the same sort of governmental repression that has characterized General Sisi’s military administration

suggesting that the long-term impact of his brutal crackdown may be on ice for the moment. Sisi's recent decision to stand as a candidate in upcoming elections and the niggling notion that his victory may be a forgone conclusion bears an unsettling similarity to the farcical electoral set-up that characterized the pre-Arab Spring era. This gradual erosion of political pluralism, coupled with individual events such as the intimidation and imprisonment of journalists, vastly overshadows modest 'successes' such as improvements for minorities and women enshrined in the new constitution, but by the standards listed Egypt's transition to democracy has been a dismal and highly significant failure.

In Libya, a benefactor of the fickle and often hypocritical western response to the Arab Spring, the challenge has been filling the void once occupied by the eclectic personality of Muammar Qaddafi and building, not rebuilding, centralized state institutions which will secure Libya's democratic future and secure the country's territorial integrity. Only Tunisia can be regarded as a modest success story, with its State of Emergency recently overturned, it seems well on its way towards democratic transition but must overcome the current political stalemate between the ruling al-Nahda Party and the secular opposition and do so within the political process.

Historical contextualization and democratization

Going on these insights it is relatively easy to ascribe the Arab Spring a democratic failure and wallow in a despondent interim, but to do so would obscure long-term developments and historical contextualization. At present we are a post-Western era, as events in Ukraine and Syria have shown, the US is no longer able (or willing) to translate its wishes into demands which suggests that the unipolar world of the post Cold War era is largely over. It is apparent that economic and political momentum has

shifted increasingly eastwards since the end of the Cold War to China, India, Russia and parts of the Middle East. Whilst the events of 9/11 largely corroborated Samuel Huntington's 'Clash of Civilizations' thesis, the failure of religious fundamentalism and violent nationalism have given relevance to what Francis Fukuyama termed the 'End of History' in 1989 – the end of man's ideological evolution and the global acceptance of values upon which the west had previously held a monopoly – namely an acceptance of liberal democracy and economics which has underpinned and driven this eastward shift. This interpretation leans heavily on Hegel who saw the driving force of history as the ironing out of man's ideological disparity and Ewan Harrison and Sara McLaughlin have argued that future world conflict will not be between competing ideologies but between the mature democracies of the west and emerging democracies, a situation they refer to as a 'Clash of Democratizations'.² The dissemination of democracy throughout international system is apparent when we look at events in Cuba and Myanmar but it must be stressed that it is a *gradual* process, it is not an overnight transition. US efforts at nation building in Iraq, which encompassed transplanting democratic institutions as a bulwark against radicalism, failed precisely because they were a quick fix, which departed from democratization as a process and a learning curve.

This historical contextualization and appreciation of the gradual spread of democracy should serve as a powerful antidote to the inevitable pessimism generated by analysis of the Arab Spring which focus too much on the short term. History has acted as a reasonably good sage for the events and subsequent developments of the Arab Spring. And whilst on the one hand it has taught us that when authoritarian regimes fall they are more often than not replaced with other authoritarian regimes, it

² Ewan Harrison and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell, *The Triumph of Democracy and the Eclipse of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 167

also attests to the tenacity, perhaps inevitability, of democratization. Authoritarian break-down is a prerequisite for democratic transition but is only ever a first step; indeed there is a chasm between triggering authoritarian breakdown and carrying through effective regime change.³ The path to Democratic transition itself is marked by periods of illiberal democracy, anocracy (regimes that have authoritarian and democratic characteristics) or outright authoritarian regressions examples of which can be seen in every Arab Spring country that has experienced transition. Whilst these regressions invariably delay democratic transition they could also be seen as growing pains of a ‘work in progress’ and see democracy’s success in general as a long-term product of failed attempts at alternatives to it.

Conclusion

Historical contextualization of a post-western world order and awareness of the gradual spread of democracy throughout the international system, allows for an assessment of the Arab Spring outside of the ‘success or failure’ paradigm. Historical contextually, is an antidote to pessimism but it is not optimistic *per say*, the path to democracy is more often than not, violent and bloody but history would suggest it is a path that is increasingly well trodden. From a theoretical perspective, the global spread of democracy allows us to see the ‘Arab Spring’ for what it was and continues to be. It allows us to observe continuity with events that came before such as the Iranian Green Revolution in 2009 and current events in Turkey and Ukraine and should caution us against referring to the ‘Arab Spring’ as a historical phenomenon that had a clear beginning and end. Undoubtedly the short term democratic impact on the region has been limited, if not minimal, but the events of the ‘Arab Spring’ has set crucial precedents that fundamentally changed the status quo. It utilized tools of

³ Clement Henry and Jang Ji-Hyang, *The Arab Spring: Will it lead to Democratic Transitions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 112

mobilization that saw nonviolent protesters achieve in two weeks results that eluded violent Islamists for two decades (perhaps forever discrediting their methods). Perhaps most importantly it served as a wake-up call to autocrats worldwide issuing hollow reforms and rhetoric of their invulnerability whilst sensitivity to the historical record should make them very aware that on a long enough time scale their autocratic days are numbered. In this long term outlook, the Arab Spring was neither a success nor a failure, it is significant episode of the post Cold War era, characterized by the relative decline of the West and the gradual spread of democracy in the international system – which even in the mature democracies of the West remain a work in progress. No compelling evidence would suggest that the Arab World is inherently incapable of joining the democratic club and one day engaging this this ‘Clash of Democratizations’, it may just be on a longer time frame than many would have liked.

Notes & Information

- Clement Henry and Jang Ji-Hyang. *The Arab Spring: Will it lead to Democratic Transitions?* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
- Ewen Harrison and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell. *The Triumph of Democracy and the Eclipse of the West.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

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Panel: Democratic Transitions and Democracy Promotion