

Explanations for the Arab Spring

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The Arab Spring was not predicted by experts of Middle Eastern politics. Two conclusions could be drawn from this: firstly, it should be questioned why experts failed to do so; secondly, the scientific community should aim at explaining why they were taken by surprise. The present short article is an attempt at the latter. Thus, the issue at hand is what caused the Arab Spring. In particular, four different approaches as outlined in the scholarly literature will be presented. The article ends with a conclusion on perspectives whether and how the different approaches might be synthesized.

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1. Introduction

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2.1 Demographic Change

A first approach to the Arab Spring argues that change was inevitable because of the critical socioeconomic development in the authoritarian states of the Middle East. According to Volker Perthes (2011: 24), the most important trigger for this change was the demographic development of the Arab world. From 1970 to 2010, the population nearly tripled, going from 128 million to 359 million inhabitants (Hegasy 2011: 41). An estimated 41 percent of these people live below the poverty line (UNDP 2009: 22), and nearly 30 percent of the population is between the ages of 20 and 35 (Perthes 2011: 30). Although the current generation is better educated and qualified than the previous one – due to a strengthened education sector and increased networking through digital technology – many are unable to find employment (*ibid.*: 30–31). The unemployment rate for the population cohort between the ages of 15 and 24 was 25.6 percent in 2003, the highest in the world (ILO 2004: 1, 8; UNDP 2009: 20). Additionally, the labor market offers limited opportunities for university graduates (Perthes 2011: 31). The consequent lack of prospects, rising costs of living, and anger over obviously corrupt and repressive rulers compelled this generation rise up against the authoritarian regimes (*ibid.*: 30–35).

2.2 Social Media

Another view, held especially by Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain (2011), attributes the outbreak of the Arab Spring to the access to digital media, including social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and text messages. Advocates of this approach make clear that the dissent between regimes and populations already existed long before the spread of the Internet. However, virtual communication gave people an

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instrument that made it possible for them to share their resentment with like-minded people and to organize movements against authoritarian rulers (ibid.: 36–37, 41).

Even before the outbreak of the riots, the strongest criticism came from political bloggers: investigative journalism in the Middle East has long been the domain of private actors (ibid.: 36, 42). The Internet showed videos which presented the corrupt rulers' luxurious standard of living, thereby substantiating the once abstract criticism of the regimes (ibid.: 36). Furthermore, digital media displayed the freedom and prosperity of people in the West and elsewhere in the world. Every day more people in the Arab world were exposed to the rest of the world through international online news or the use of programs like Skype to talk with friends or relatives living abroad (see Howard and Hussain 2011: 36, 42). The increasingly multilayered access to media gave people the opportunity to question political norms and values – often leading to a democratic orientation.

After Mohammad Bouazizi's legendary self-immolation, people communicated throughout Tunisia in various online forums, expressing their solidarity as well as their dissatisfaction with the political situation in the country. Social media offered a space for solidarity that was ultimately transferred from the virtual world to the real one and manifested in mass protests against the authoritarian regime (ibid.: 36–38). Messages and posts on Facebook and Twitter or simple text messages immediately informed protestors about the next step of action and the location where it would take place. Within a few weeks, guided instructions for organizing successful protests were circulated on the Internet (ibid.: 38–40). Authentic videos and pictures taken by protesters with cameras on mobile phones inspired citizens of other Arab states to organize protests – some of which were the largest in decades (ibid.: 38, 43). Abroad, social media platforms were used as channels to support protestors, to express solidarity, and to encourage people in their chosen path; for instance, external supporters programmed software that enabled activists to circumvent government firewalls (ibid.: 37, 44).

2.3 “Karama!”

As diverse as the uprisings in the Arab countries may have been, all protests were directly linked to the demands for human dignity (*karama*), freedom, and social justice (Asseburg 2011: 3; Perthes 2011: 33–34). The first major mass protest in Egypt on 25 January 2011 brought thousands of people to Tahrir Square in Cairo carrying the words “bread, freedom and human dignity” (HRW 2012). With slogans like these, people called for just structures that did not constrain them from access to jobs because they didn't belong to a particular family; political and economic systems not permeated by omnipresent corruption; and a state that would not force them to accept a poor social and economic situation (West 2011: 16). Thus, the assumption held by many in the West that the culture and religion, or the “mentality,” of people in the Arab world, are incompatible with democratic values can be refuted (Beck 2011b).

2.4 Economic Liberalization without Political Reforms

From a political-economic point of view, the Arab Spring was caused by a fundamental crisis of the authoritarian social contract. The contract had regulated relations between the people of the Arab world and the power systems for decades (Harders 2011). This authoritarian bargain implicitly promised the population a minimum of subsidies. In exchange, people preserved some degree of political loyalty to the regime. If this minimum economic safety net guaranteed by the state were no longer maintained, the regime would suffer from a deficit of legitimacy and the authoritarian bargain would collapse (Desai et al. 2011). However, the timing of the Arab Spring still cannot be explained, as the crises that led to the failure of the Middle Eastern authoritarian bargain in 2011 had existed for years, if not decades (Beck 2010).

One result of the regional oil boom in the 1970s was the establishment of the rent-based system of “petrolism” in the Middle East. Rents are incomes which are not balanced by labor and capital, and are thus at the free disposal of the recipients. In the 1970s, not only did the incomes generated by rents of the oil-producing states in the Middle East escalate, but, through politically motivated transfers from the Arab oil states to the oil-poor countries of the region, political rentier states also emerged (Beck 2009). Because of falling oil prices, the system of petrolism fell into crisis during the last two decades of the twentieth century. The regimes of the Middle East reacted with a relatively complex, but unsustainable, attempt at crisis management, adopting limited economic reforms mostly aimed at enforcing foreign trade (Fürting 2007; Richter 2011). At different stages most countries initiated political liberalization, but then withdrew from it in deliberalization phases (Kienle 2001). The structural dependence on rents, however, was not overcome. Two of the rentier system’s typical defects appeared (although this still does not explain the exact timing of the Arab Spring): First, the distribution-oriented strategy of the rentier country eventually meets its limits. The productive sectors are neglected and government spending expands (especially with high population growth), while chances to generate compensating income through taxes are limited due to the neglected productive potential. Second, the primacy of the distributional policy is intended to depoliticize society. Therefore, the development of political institutions is neglected in rentier states. Again, this cannot explain the outbreak of the Arab Spring, but it makes it plausible that once the regimes in the Middle East were confronted with a powerful opposition movement, they did not have the appropriate means to drive those movements on system-compatible paths (Beck 2009, 2011a).

3. Conclusion

Much more research has to be done in order to come up with a fully satisfactory explanation of the Arab Spring. Yet, at this point it is obvious that major aspects of the different approaches to explain the Arab Spring are not mutually excluding. We believe that the best starting point of an explanation is provided by the fourth approach, i.e. by the idea that half-hearted implementation of liberalization without political reforms caused a severe crisis of the authoritarian social contracts in the Arab world. So-called

structural adjustment in the Arab World produced winners—but also losers. Due to the obstacles of rentier systems to promote sustainable growth, particularly in the private sector, the Arab economies could not cope with the “youth bulge.” Therefore, as outlined in the first approach, young educated people seeking jobs could not be absorbed in the labor market—and thus found themselves as losers despite being better qualified than the older generations. Due to their high education, the protestors proved to be capable of using modern means of communication, as provided by globalization. Moreover, not only the “hardware”(as outlined in the second approach) but also the “software” (as pointed out in the third approach) of the protestors was shaped by globalization. As active participants of globalization, the protestors proved to be sensitive to universal values of human rights and democracy.

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