

Revolution spinning in the wind

## **What is happening in Egypt and Tunisia, which have toppled their leaders, and in Libya and Syria, fighting to topple theirs**

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HUNDREDS of thousands throng the main square of an Arab capital in a stunning show of defiance. Disgraced, the government falls. The opposition sweeps into power. Hated regime figures scuttle offstage. Exiles return and political prisoners walk free. The talk is of a complete break with the past.

But this is not Egypt or Tunisia, where the wave of political upheaval sweeping the Arab world crested last winter, toppling the regimes of Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali. This was Lebanon in 2005. Six years later the forces that triumphed in what was then fancifully dubbed the Cedar revolution are in disarray. Lebanon's chronic plagues all persist: sectarianism, corruption, the insecurity brought by a weak central state, foreign meddling and armed party militias.

Lebanon differs from other Arab countries. Its messy pluralism does not fit the mould of patriarchal police states that took hold in the region in the 1950s, a time of military coups and oil bonanzas. Still, Lebanon's fizzled revolution, like those of Algeria's Islamists in 1991, of Iran's Green movement in 2009, or of Bahrain's protesters earlier this year, should serve as a caution to people who see in the current Arab spring (or awakening) a transformation as inexorable as the change of seasons.

Perhaps with time all Arab regimes will indeed head the way of Egypt's and Tunisia's, or at any rate feel obliged to surrender big chunks of power to their people as a price for survival. The sense of having reached a watershed runs deep among Arabs, particularly the young. For weeks in February and March the ubiquitous Al Jazeera channel flashed a slick montage of images between hourly news bulletins, showing beleaguered autocrats succumbing to popular outrage and ending with the jaunty caption, "Who's Next?"

Yet for all their drama, and despite the satisfaction of seeing hated rulers fall, the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia have had to struggle to maintain momentum. The bloodier would-be revolutions in Libya (see [article](#)) and Syria (see [article](#)) and Yemen have dragged on for months, generating ever more destruction, with no resolution plainly in sight. Other Arab states, especially the monarchies, have so far parried calls for change with seeming success, using the familiar mix of coercion, co-option and promises.

So the pertinent question is perhaps not so much who will be next to fall but rather, what follows? The answer is not at all clear. The universal inclination of the revolutionary ferment is to create the more open, pluralist, democratic societies that have emerged in much of the world. But after two generations in a political deep freeze, Arabs face special challenges in getting there. Among these are such essential questions as how to frame relations between Islam and the state, how to incorporate ethnic and religious minorities and how to share oil revenues. Many Arab countries also face burdensome administrative legacies. Years of unaccountable rule have

left hugely swollen, often venal bureaucracies, creaky courts, nasty security services spoiled by privilege, and publics addicted to unsustainable subsidies for such things as food and energy.

Other places have faced similar difficulties, but usually in a more helpful context. When the iron curtain fell in 1989 it brought down a whole ideological construct, leaving relatively clear ground on which to build something new. The well-tested, culturally affinitive models offered by neighbouring states accelerated domino-tipping waves of change in southern Europe in the 1970s and in Latin America in the 1980s. Democratic transitions in, say, Portugal or Argentina could borrow essentially off-the-shelf solutions.

Many non-Arab, Muslim-majority countries, including Turkey, Indonesia, Malaysia, Bangladesh and, some might even argue, Iran, have found their own unique way forward. But their experiences, which often benefited from such things as high literacy rates and an absence of external threats, are even less familiar to most Arabs than those of western Europe. Today's Arab revolutionaries are proud, prickly and wary of foreign influence. They will have to forge their own paths towards democracy because, as yet, no specifically Arab model has emerged.

The most obvious casualties of the Arab awakening, so far, have been heads of state. Those of Tunisia and Egypt were taken by surprise. They were betrayed, ironically, by the professionalism of the institutions intended to protect them. Their first tier of defence, the feared police, collapsed, and then the armies refused to shoot their own people. By contrast, the clan-based regimes of Libya, Yemen and Syria are hardened by a ruthless, loyal core and ringed by elaborately layered security services designed to keep each other in check and to neutralise threats by remaining shadowy and capriciously vicious. Their dictators thought they could get ahead of the curve with small concessions and mean threats. Instead they have found themselves slipping violently under it.

Yet the fall of dictators represents only part of a longer process in which the unspoken aim is to alter radically the balance of power between citizens and their state. Some Arab regimes may well survive this transition, so long as they understand that something very fundamental has to change. Such understanding does not come easily, as the revolutionaries of Egypt and Tunisia, the front-running reformers, have found to their dismay.

### **Back to the square**

Six months after the giant street protests that shook central Tunis and Cairo, both cities still witness periodic shows of mass people-power. On July 8th hundreds of thousands of Egyptians again filled Tahrir Square, and a fervent few have again pitched camp there. The immediate catalysts for these protests differ, and in the new atmosphere of freedom in both countries the demands that are voiced vary widely. But their overall intent is the same. The protesters mean to signal sharp dissatisfaction with the depth and pace of change, and to remind the older men who still hold the reins of power that the public will consider them guilty of backsliding from revolutionary aims until they prove themselves innocent.

The generals who now ostensibly rule Egypt and its vast, lumbering administrative machine are products of six decades of autocratic rule. So is the clubby coastal elite that continues to dominate Tunisia (see [article](#), which reports a reasonably hopeful situation there). Even with the

best of intentions these old guards find it hard to absorb the challenge presented by a newly empowered citizenry, backed by a feisty press and the streetwise zeal of bold young revolutionaries.

These contrasts are starkest in Egypt. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, a body of 19 generals that serves as a temporary executive branch, often seems bewildered by the demands besieging it. The generals have tried to be accessible via a Facebook page and meetings with critics. But their communiqués are woolly or bullying, and their “dialogues” sound more like sermons. The council’s decisions reflect a faintly alarming mix of deep conservatism and hypersensitivity. After nationalist rumblings, for instance, the army vetoed help from the IMF and the World Bank, despite the offer of unprecedentedly lenient terms and the urgent need to kick-start Egypt’s stalling economy.

Haphazard attempts to prosecute crimes committed under the pre-revolutionary regime have generated further discomfort. Judges have passed draconian sentences for minor cases of corruption and abuse of power, frightening much of a business class that almost universally submitted during Mr Mubarak’s long reign to rapacious demands for bribes. Yet so far Egypt’s courts have largely shielded the biggest fish from punishment, including Mr Mubarak himself and the security officers responsible for widespread torture, as well as the killing of hundreds of people during the revolution. “In 1952 we had a coup that turned into a revolution,” grumbles a young activist in Cairo, referring to the army putsch that overthrew King Farouk and then replaced his liberal democracy with a socialist dictatorship. “This time we seem to have had a revolution that turned into a coup.”

Elections in Egypt and Tunisia are not scheduled before the autumn (Egypt’s has just been pushed back from September to November). In the absence of parliaments a sort of rolling dialogue has unfolded, whereby public anger builds at the lack of progress, resulting in protests that prompt interim governments to further concessions. But such protests increasingly lack focus, reflecting an explosion of political activism. The fragmentation alarms liberal secularists. They fear that Islamists, reputedly more disciplined and also armed with a simpler message, will exploit such advantages to surge ahead at the polls.

The main Islamist parties, Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and the Nahda party in Tunisia, do look likely to emerge with the biggest parliamentary quotas. But opinion polls suggest that neither is likely to take more than 20% of the overall vote, a proportion that has been fairly typical of the performance of mainstream Islamist parties in many Muslim countries. They will be big fish in a pond teeming with other creatures. Many of the other fish, moreover, are likely to be rival Islamists.

Salafist groups in Egypt, who represent the ultra-puritan part of a very broad Islamist spectrum, and include groups that once espoused armed *jihad*, have formed at least four separate parties. The Salafists have clashed bitterly not only with secular parties, but also with the declining, though still influential, Sufi groups who represent a more esoteric and traditional version of Islam. The Muslim Brotherhood, milder than the Salafists but with pretensions to represent orthodoxy, has itself spun off new political trends. The group’s rigid hierarchy and seeming

eagerness to curry favour with Egypt's ruling generals have alienated some of its younger members, prompting the creation of a number of splinter parties.

In both countries frustration over the unsteady direction of change has tended, perhaps unfairly, to overshadow real gains. Despite pressures from the army, Egypt's independent press remains determinedly outspoken. The caretaker prime ministers are broadly popular and generally regarded as sincerely committed to reform. Both countries have seen rises in crime after the collapse of the police, yet remain safer than many Western countries. Secret police services still seem to exercise shadowy influence, yet in neither country is there any sign of their regaining power.

Sparring between secularists and Islamists, left and right, has marred the emerging debates over the new constitutions that both countries hope to draft by next year. Yet these constitutional debates are growing more serious, and on most issues a surprising degree of consensus has emerged: legislatures should be strong; executive powers limited; judiciaries independent; public freedoms and human rights must be guaranteed; social policies should be equitable. On the tricky question of Islam and the state, the likely outcome may be a sort of fudge, with the state described as "civil" rather than secular, and Islamic law being accepted as an underlying principle for legislation rather than a literal prescription.

As the revolutionary duo wend their wobbly ways to democracy, another country may be stealing a march on them. Spooked by the revolutions, pushed by a burgeoning local protest movement and better advised than other Arab sovereigns, Morocco's King Muhammad VI announced in March a series of reforms, including the drafting of the new constitution that was overwhelmingly approved in a referendum on July 1st. The king has held onto most of his privileges, and critics say he has simply bought time before another wave of pressure mounts. Yet even his modest concessions to an elected parliament acknowledge the ultimately irresistible potency of the trend towards empowering the people.

### **Monarchs with money**

The oil-rich monarchs at the other end of the region have more money to buy time. Saudi Arabia, the Arabian peninsula's behemoth and perhaps the world's arch-autocracy, is understandably the most alarmed about what its rulers see as a rising threat to their world. The kingdom's ageing senior princes are shocked by the abrupt fall, speeded by what they see as the West's "betrayal", of Egypt and Tunisia's equally aged presidents, and the subsequent hounding of their families for corruption. "Basically they want the revolutions to fail," says a Saudi dissident, who foresees a return to the regional politics of the 1960s, when Saudi Arabia sparred with revolutionary republics in what some dubbed an Arab cold war.

The kingdom has responded internally to the challenge in typical fashion. It has showered money on its people in the form of a promised \$120 billion in new social spending, while slapping extra restrictions on its press and tightening police control of public gatherings. Some of that cash may subtly undermine reforms elsewhere. While welcome, given Egypt's squeezed finances, a generous Saudi pledge of \$4 billion in aid raises Egyptian fears that strings may be quietly attached. Private Saudi funding, often filtered through lavishly government-supported charities, bolsters Salafists in Egypt who believe that Muslims should blindly obey their rulers and deride

democracy as “man-made law”. The Saudi press has also dutifully played up stories of troubles, such as rising crime rates in the post-revolutionary states, leading to an unhelpful drop in tourist arrivals from the Gulf.

The Saudis’ intervention in Bahrain was nothing like so delicate. They sent armoured columns to bolster the ruling Al Khalifa family in its fierce crackdown on unarmed protesters, and have loudly portrayed their small neighbour’s crisis as an example of Shia perfidy, sponsored by the arch-enemy Iran. Aversion to revolutions has also jolted normally milder Gulf sovereigns into unusual harshness. A state school in Kuwait, for instance, abruptly expelled a ten-year-old Egyptian child who had innocently asked why there was no revolution in the emirate. The United Arab Emirates, best known for the freewheeling style of Dubai, has taken to rounding up and jailing critics of the government, a rare breed among the small but immensely wealthy minority of the country’s residents who happen to be native citizens.

The Gulf’s rulers can perhaps afford to be complacent, for a time. Years of high oil prices have plumped their wallets. Bahrain excepted, they suffer no toiling masses yearning to be free, aside from deportable foreign labourers. Yet even in the Gulf something has changed. Privately and on the internet, citizens ridicule the ruling families. A gap in outlook yawns between young people attuned to the world and an older generation restrained by deference to power and tradition.

In a few years countries such as Saudi Arabia could find themselves surrounded by fellow Arab states whose citizens gleefully express their entitlement to accountable government. Some may prove models of constitutional monarchy that look easily applicable elsewhere. Others may evolve ways of accommodating Islamic rules within a consensual context of tolerance and pragmatism. The question then would be, why not here?

Of course, events could tip in another direction. The earlier Arab democratisers, Egypt and Tunisia, might remain unstable for years to come. They could look like Lebanon or Iraq, the best democracies the Arab world has, where uninspiring politics is marked by rickety compromises shadowed by the trauma of civil wars. Egypt’s generals could also lose patience with the rowdy revolutionaries and clamp on martial law. And bloody turmoil in places such as Syria and Yemen could persist to a degree that makes other Arabs wary of even trying for change.

Such setbacks are possible, perhaps even likely. Yet the overall trend towards democratisation is no more stoppable in the Arab world than it has been elsewhere. “You have to understand that this is not a bunch of different revolutions,” explains a sunken-eyed Syrian student, taking a breather in Lebanon from weeks of protest-organising in Damascus. “This is one big revolution for all the Arabs. It will not stop until it reaches everywhere.”