

Helpdesk Research Report

Analysis of the Arab Spring

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Question

What are the main points of consensus in the analysis of the Arab Spring about the factors that led to it and what tipped the balance into widespread protest/unrest?

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1. Overview

There has been much analysis of the causes and rapid spread of the 2011 Arab Spring (or Arab uprisings). General consensus emerges on a combination of political, economic and social factors as being critical. These can be divided into: a) structural, long-standing, underlying factors that led to a build-up of popular anger and frustration in Arab countries; and b) proximate, more immediate factors that transformed localised protests into nationwide movements, and fanned uprisings across the region.

While there are common factors, the literature also stresses the importance of looking at each country and each uprising in its own context. The uprisings were profoundly different, focused on domestic, national issues, and the precise mix of structural and proximate factors was specific to each country (Delacoura, 2012). There were also some factors unique to the individual countries involved. In Bahrain, for example, grievances on the part of the Shia majority against a Sunni monarchy seen as engaged in demographic manipulation (e.g. importing Sunnis and offering them Bahraini citizenship) aimed at perpetuating an unequal state of affairs, played a significant role (ICG, 2011c).

The literature acknowledges that identification of structural and proximate factors can go only so far in explaining the causes and timing of the Arab uprisings: 'Ultimately, we may have to accept that the rebellions were spontaneous popular events' (Delacoura, 2012: p. 69).

The key points raised in the literature include:

Structural factors

- The breakdown of the ‘authoritarian bargain’ or exclusionary social contract, whereby the state provided services, employment and food-energy subsidies in return for political support (or compliance), was the overarching reason for loss of legitimacy by Arab regimes and popular anger against them (Winckler, 2013; Beck and Huser, 2013; World Bank, 2015).
- A population explosion in the Arab world (Beck and Huser, 2013) coupled with government failures to carry out structural reforms and create jobs, led to rising unemployment, in particular youth unemployment (Winckler, 2013; Lesch, 2013; World Bank, 2015). Improvements in education levels across the region contributed to raised expectations among young people – and frustration when public sector jobs were no longer available, and those in the private sector were low-paid or unsuited to their skills (UN ESCWA, 2014; Gardner, 2003).
- Austerity measures introduced as a result of structural adjustment programmes, and the impact of the global financial crisis, led to rising prices (particularly food prices), economic hardship and deteriorating living standards for the majority of people (Ardic, 2012; Winckler, 2013; Lesch, 2013; World Bank, 2015).
- Corruption by ruling elites and their cronies was carried out both on a larger scale and in a far more blatant fashion, further widening income inequality. The sharp contrast between the struggles of ordinary people and the luxuries enjoyed by corrupt elites fuelled public anger (Ardic, 2012; Lesch, 2013; Winckler, 2013).
- The ‘authoritarian contract’ led to the emergence of a substantial middle class in Arab countries, but they saw their quality of life deteriorate as the contract broke down (UN ESCWA, 2014). Statistics on life satisfaction show that, by the end of the 2000s, people in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen were among the least happy people in the world (World Bank, 2015).
- Authoritarian regimes were characterised by consolidation of power in the hands of a few; denial of fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and of organisation; use of violence to suppress opposition and massive abuses of human rights. Moreover, as the exclusionary social contract broke down, regimes became more dependent on repression and violence. Greater access to information and awareness, including of individual cases of blatant human rights abuses by the security services, led to widespread anger and a sense of injustice (Salih, 2013; Lesch, 2013; Howard and Hussain, 2011).
- Public anger and frustration at the lack of jobs, denial of rights, corruption, inequality and so on, fuelled a desire to restore individual and national dignity (*karama*) (Delacoura, 2012; Gerges, 2014; Lesch 2013; Beck and Huser, 2013; Ardic 2012).

Proximate factors

- Electronic information networks and social media played a critical role in raising awareness of abuses (notably Muhammed Bouazizi’s self-immolation which triggered the Tunisia uprising), mobilising protesters, and in sustaining action and ‘defeating’ the security services during the uprisings (Howard and Hussain, 2011; Delacoura, 2012).
- There was a definite demonstration effect driving the Arab Spring, evident from the speed with which uprisings followed each other across the region, as people saw what was happening in other countries and were inspired to follow suit (Lesch, 2013; ICG, 2011b).

- Blunders in state response, in particular using a heavy-handed approach and trying to crush opposition, had the reverse effect of galvanising more people to join the protests (ICG, 2011b and 2011d).
- The armed forces played a decisive role in many of the Arab uprisings, particularly the early ones in Tunisia and Egypt. In both countries the army opted to side with the people, forcing Ben Ali and Mubarak to step down. In Libya, by contrast, the army split along regime and opposition lines leading to civil war. In Syria, the core of the army remained loyal to the Assad regime, resulting in ongoing conflict (Salih, 2013; ICG, 2011a and 2011d; Delacoura, 2012; Gerges, 2014).
- The protests were not ideological, were not led by political parties or indeed any leading figures, and generally started spontaneously. The demand for regime change and social justice had inclusive appeal, uniting people from different groups in society. The grassroots nature and scale of popular mobilisation made it difficult for regimes to take effective action against them (ICG, 2011a and 2011d; Ardic, 2012).

2. Structural factors

Breakdown of social contract

All the countries involved in the Arab Spring had authoritarian regimes, many of which had been in power for decades. Their survival rested on an ‘authoritarian bargain’ or social contract, whereby the regime would provide social services and large-scale public sector employment (including through nationalised industries) and massively subsidise basic foodstuffs and energy, in exchange for political compliance by citizens (Winckler, 2013; Beck and Huser, 2013; World Bank, 2015). This contract worked in the 1950s and 1960s because populations were relatively small; in the 1970s the oil boom kept it going, despite population expansion; in the 1980s it started coming under pressure as oil prices dropped, but regional developments in the 1990s (Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait) and the financial windfall associated with these enabled regimes to keep funding subsidies and public sector employment. By the 2000s, however, economic and demographic changes meant it was no longer sustainable.

It was the breakdown of this exclusionary social contract that precipitated the Arab uprisings (Winckler, 2013; Beck and Huser, 2013; World Bank, 2015): as regimes failed to deliver jobs and services, and as economic inequality became worse, so public anger at authoritarian rule grew. Regimes responded with greater suppression of fundamental rights and greater reliance on abusive security services to maintain control – further fuelling anger and opposition.

The case of Saudi Arabia illustrates how grievances against the regime were pacified and the social contract maintained so that a mass uprising was avoided. Protests began on 25 January 2011 over poor infrastructure in Jeddah, but escalated into an online campaign calling for major political and economic changes. Protests spread, and in February 2011 a group of intellectuals submitted a memorandum to the King calling for political reform; youth submitted their own memorandum calling (among other things) for job creation and an end to corruption. The King responded by offering a reform package, mostly comprising financial benefits: allocation of US\$29 billion to aid the unemployed; approval of US\$2 billion for construction of housing units; 15% increase in salaries of government officials (Salih, 2013: p. 199). In this way, Saudi Arabia was able to quell the protests and maintain the ‘authoritarian bargain’. Saudi Arabia even handed out billions of dollars to bolster other regimes under threat during the Arab Spring, e.g. Kuwait and Jordan (Lawson, 2015). Other Gulf Cooperation Cooperation (GCC) countries took the

same approach – largesse coupled with repression – to curb domestic opposition and remain in power (ibid.).

Population explosion and unemployment

As noted, one of the main pillars of the exclusionary social contract was provision of public sector employment. Dependence on public sector jobs in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is clear from data of government wages as a percentage of GDP: the figure for MENA was 9.8% in the 1990s compared to 6.7% in Africa and 3.7% in Europe and Central Asia.¹ By the 2000s this became unfeasible for two reasons. The first was a massive population explosion in the region. From 1970 to 2010 the population of the Arab world almost tripled, going from 128 million to 359 million inhabitants; significantly, nearly 30% of the population was between the ages of 25 and 30 (Beck and Huser, 2013) and 65% under the age of 25 (Ardic, 2012). The state was unable to provide public sector jobs to keep pace with this rate of population expansion (Winckler, 2013). ‘Faced with bloated and often inefficient bureaucracies and excessive wage bills, traditional strategies of utilising public sector employment as a means to soak up excessive labour demands reached their tipping point’.² The drop in public sector jobs is apparent from figures showing its share of the workforce: in Egypt, for example, the public sector used to absorb 70% of the workforce in 1980, compared to 15.5% in the informal private sector and 7.5% in the formal private sector. By 2000, the public sector employed only 23% compared to 41.8% in the informal private sector and 9.6% in the formal private sector (UN ESCWA, 2014: p.80).

The second was the failure by regimes to create jobs outside the state to cater to the needs of the growing population, especially young people. In the 1970s oil boom period, regimes had neglected to carry out structural reforms that would have reoriented their economies away from services and rents to export-oriented industries that could generate large-scale, skilled jobs. While deep economic reforms promote job creation in industrial and manufacturing sectors, the kinds of shallow reforms undertaken in Arab countries generated low-skilled jobs in restaurants, shops and hotels (Douglas et al, 2013; UN ESCWA, 2014: p.80). Other reasons were corruption and mismanagement, and the capture of large segments of the economy by politically connected firms, slowing down reform, innovation and employment creation. Economic policy was biased towards such firms, neglecting SMEs and the masses (Winckler, 2013; Lesch, 2013; World Bank, 2015).

With few good jobs created in the formal sectors (private and SOEs), and many of the new jobs that were created being low-skilled and low-paid (World Bank, 2015, Winckler, 2013), unemployment rose. In Algeria, for example, the unemployment rate went from 19.8% in 1990 to 29.9% in 2000 (Gardner, 2003: Table 1). Many countries at this time displayed an imbalance between a relatively high economic-growth rate and a worsening of the employment situation. In Tunisia, for example, where economic growth rates averaged 5% annually during the 1990s and 2000s, unemployment actually rose, as most of the new jobs were low-skilled and low-paying. Similarly, in Egypt overall economic growth did not have a significant impact on employment (Winckler, 2013).

Youth and education

The large share of *young* people in the population and high levels of *youth* unemployment are identified as particularly important in the Arab Spring context. While earlier generations of youth benefited from

¹ Bteddini, L. (9 May 2012), ‘Governance and Public Sector employment in the Middle East and North Africa’ (World Bank blog): <http://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/governance-and-public-sector-employment-middle-east-and-north-africa>

² Ibid.

free education, job guarantees and other entitlements, those born after 1980 were no longer guaranteed these same institutions and high living standards.³ The unemployment rate among those between the ages of 15 and 24 was 25.6% in 2003, the highest in the world (Beck and Huser, 2013: p. 2). The number of unemployed youth in the Middle East increased by 25% between 1998 and 2008 (this compares to 14.7% in sub-Saharan Africa) (ILO, 2010: p. 17).

The rise in youth unemployment in Arab Spring countries came about despite improvements in education. Education levels increased significantly in the Middle East in the past three decades and were, on average, higher than those in countries with similar development levels (Ansari and Daniels, 2012). Over the period from 1980 to 2010, the average years of schooling for those over 25 years old in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia at least doubled, and in many cases increased almost threefold (*ibid*, p. 13). There was also significant improvement in higher education attainment (UN ESCWA, 2014: p. 51). Increased education made people unwilling to take the low-skilled, low-paid jobs that might be available to them; most still craved the security of public sector employment (Gardner, 2003). A 2009 survey found that 80% of Syrian graduates reported a preference for public sector jobs, with nearly 60% saying they would only take such a job.⁴ However, the *quality* of education in Arab countries has also been identified as contributing to high youth unemployment: the education systems largely prepared students for employment in government bureaucracies – where opportunities were limited – and did not provide them with the knowledge and skills needed for the modern world.⁵ ‘The skills mismatch in turn increase(d) pressure on the public sector to absorb graduates unable to find jobs in the private sector’ (Gardner, 2003).

While the causal nexus between education and democracy is debated, studies show that education – in particular primary schooling – can be a strong predictor of democratisation. One study of MENA countries plotted scores for a commonly used indicator of democracy against average years of schooling: it found the democracy index scores to be considerably lower than those corresponding to their education levels (*ibid*, p.11-12). Thanks to their higher levels of education, as well as globalisation and ready availability of information, this generation differed from previous ones in having greater awareness of how people elsewhere lived and higher expectations for themselves. ‘The increased capacities of Arab youth...and their inability to translate these human development gains into higher incomes and political participation explains why the middle class shifted allegiance and took to the streets’ (UN, ESCWA, 2014: p.6).

Rising prices and inequality

Economic hardship due to rising unemployment was exacerbated by austerity measures imposed by the World Bank and IMF structural adjustment programmes (e.g. in Egypt in 1991) and rising prices. Government subsidies of basic essential commodities were slashed or cancelled, public sector jobs were substantially reduced, national industries were privatised, and taxation increased, leading to inflation and economic impoverishment of the majority of people (Salih, 2013; Lesch, 2013).

³ Desai, R., Olofsgard and Yusef (2011), ‘Is the Arab Authoritarian Bargain Collapsing?’ in *Brookings Institution Opinion*, 9 February 2011. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/02/09-arab-economies-desai-yusef>

⁴ Bteddini, op. cit.

⁵ Adams, A. and Winthrop, R. (2011), ‘The Role of Education in the Arab Revolutions’ in *Brookings Institution Opinion*, June 10 2011. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/opinions/2011/06/10-arab-world-education-winthrop>.

The global economic crisis of 2007-08 hit the Middle East and North Africa especially hard because of their high dependence on imported food. Most Arab countries buy half of what they eat from abroad. This means they 'suck in food inflation when world prices rise' – in 2007-08, they spiked, with some staple crops doubling in price; in Egypt local food prices rose 37% in 2008-10.⁶ There was a region-wide 32% increase in food prices in 2010 (Ardic, 2012: p. 18). Prices rose despite increases in government subsidies in some countries: Tunisia's governmental expenditures on subsidies tripled between 2000 and 2010, but even this was not enough to maintain the prices of basic foodstuff and energy products (Winckler, 2013). Many of the Arab Spring countries (Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco) saw demonstrations about food in 2008.

High rates of unemployment and inflation (as well as corruption – see below) led to a widening of the gap between rich and poor, and created the phenomenon of 'middle-class poverty' (Ardic, 2012). Structural adjustment programmes widened the divide between haves and have nots, as ordinary people faced economic hardship, while elites carried on enriching themselves through corruption, amassing vast amounts of wealth (Salih, 2013). Strong economic growth rates in Tunisia and Egypt failed (as with reduction in unemployment) to translate into reduced inequality (Ardic, 2012). The contrast between the living standards of the elite (gated communities, private schools and hospitals, extravagance) and of ordinary people (decaying urban infrastructure, informal housing, and persistent poverty) was stark. Nearly half the residents of Cairo lived in unplanned areas that lacked basic utilities, sometimes living in wooden shacks (Lesch, 2013).

In Tunisia, income inequality between different parts of the country was an important factor in the uprising. There was a large divide between the interior and the coast. The interior regions were much poorer and had higher levels of unemployment, while the coast (and Tunis in particular) was better off and people generally had a higher quality of life – leading to resentment among those in the interior (expert comment). The consequences of Mohammed Bouazizi's self-immolation have been contrasted with a similar event in Tunisia in March 2010, when an unemployed fruit vendor, Abdesselem Trimech, set himself on fire outside the town municipal office. Trimech was from Monastir, a major tourist resort along the coast; Bouazizi came from Sidi Bouzid in the economically and culturally marginalized hinterland. The area's relative economic underdevelopment, lack of public services, and high unemployment created a sense of relative deprivation among people there (that they were worse off than their countrymen elsewhere), and this resentment accounts for the contrasting local reactions to Trimech's and Bouazizi's deaths (Patel, 2014).

Middle class frustration

The 'authoritarian social contract' whereby the state provided jobs, services and subsidies, led to the emergence of a large middle class in Arab countries. A UN report put the aggregate share of the middle class in Arab countries in 2000 at 47.3% (UN ESCWA, 2014: p. 35). This varied from country to country but in most was substantial, for example: Egypt 44% in 2011, Tunisia 57.5% in 2010, Yemen 31.6% in 2006, and Syria 56.5% in 2007 (*ibid*). However, as the authoritarian bargain broke down, the middle class saw their quality of life deteriorate: services and subsidies were cut, people had to spend large shares of their income on private education and healthcare, public sector jobs were no longer available and there were few other good job opportunities. Despite this, the *share* of the middle class remained relatively stable until 2011 (*ibid*).

⁶ 'Food and the Arab Spring: Let them eat baklava', *The Economist*, March 17 2012.
<http://www.economist.com/node/21550328>

Popular frustration, particularly among the middle class, at deteriorating living conditions is reflected in the precipitous decline in life satisfaction scores on the eve of the Arab Spring (World Bank, 2015). In Egypt, for example, average life-evaluation levels plunged from 5.5 in 2007 to 4.4 in 2010 – a deep drop in the context of improvements observed in socio-economic statistics and growth in per capita incomes (*ibid.*: p. 25). Thus, by the end of the 2000s, people in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen were among the least happy people in the world. Statistics also showed a rise in dissatisfaction with the quality of government services that influence the quality of life. The percentage of people dissatisfied with the availability of affordable housing rose most dramatically, but there was also increase in the incidence of people dissatisfied with public transportation, quality healthcare, and availability of quality jobs (*ibid.*). Young men were especially unhappy as they struggled to find decent jobs and start families. Middle class frustration was vented in the Arab Spring. A study of those who participated in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings found that the middle class participated disproportionately in both (Beissinger et al, 2012).

Corruption

Corruption emerges strongly from the literature as a driver of public anger in Arab Spring countries (Ardic, 2012; Lesch, 2013; Winckler, 2013). As ordinary people saw their living standards drop, they contrasted this with increasingly blatant corruption and wealth concentration among the elite. The drop in life satisfaction noted above was driven by dissatisfaction with living conditions, but also by the increased importance of perceptions about corruption for life satisfaction (World Bank, 2015).

Authoritarian regimes in Arab Spring countries were characterised by widespread corruption and patrimonial mechanisms that favoured a small segment of the society: the ruling party, the ruler's family and their cronies and loyalists (Ardic, 2012). In the years leading up to the Arab Spring, corruption had become both more blatant and on a much larger scale (Lesch, 2013). On May 3, 2011, the Swiss government declared that it would freeze US\$1 billion worth of assets that belonged to Qaddafi, Mubarak and Ben Ali.⁷

In some cases greed on the part of ruling families reached such an extent that even party members were excluded. 'In Tunisia, what had been a one-party state had become the private preserve of the president and the first family. Economic resources that had been previously shared among the elite were increasingly monopolised by Ben Ali and his wife, Leila Trabelsi' (ICG, 2011d).

The rise in corruption among ruling elites compared to early leaders was another factor in the breakdown of the 'authoritarian bargain': 'While the first generation of revolutionary leaders, such as Gamal Abd al-Nasser of Egypt; Hafiz al-Assad of Syria and even Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia enjoyed broad public support – *inter alia* due to their personal modesty and simplicity – the second and third generation were regarded by their people as corrupt and aloof' (Winckler, 2013: p. 5).

Autocratic regimes

As Arab regimes failed to deliver on their side of the social contract so public tolerance of authoritarian rule gave way to anger and vocal opposition. Regimes in turn became even more repressive and violent, characterised by increased authoritarianism and consolidation of power (and, in many cases, paving the way for succession within the family); denial of fundamental rights like freedom of expression, freedom of the press, and freedom of organisation; routine use of violence to remain in power and massive violations of human rights (Salih, 2013).

⁷ 'Swiss freeze US\$1 billion in Gaddafi, Mubarak, Ben Ali assets', BBC, 3 May 2011.
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/mobile/world-europe-13264931>

A number of countries imposed state of emergency⁸ laws, purportedly to fight terrorism, but in reality to increase controls over their own citizens and justify crimes against them (ibid; Lesch, 2013; Ansane and Daniele, 2012).

The literature identifies two developments that contributed to undermining the legitimacy of Arab Spring regimes and thus the 'authoritarian bargain'. One was the end of the Cold War, and the lessening in significance to and therefore support from former international allies, notably the United States and the Soviet Union. Cold War imperatives had led the superpowers to side with oppressive regimes, but with that imperative removed, the absence of legitimacy in those countries became more visible (Ardic, 2012). The second was the spread of electronic information networks (non-state media channels such as Al-Jazeera, social media...) which raised public awareness of corruption and abuses in their own countries, and enabled them to contrast this with the democratic norms practised in other parts of the world. 'The internet showed videos which presented the corrupt rulers' luxurious standard of living, thereby substantiating the once abstract criticism of the regimes' (Howard and Hussain, 2011). WikiLeaks in 2009, for example, revealed some of the 'dirty secrets' of regimes, as in the case of the Ben Ali family's corruption and wealth in Tunisia (ibid.).

People felt anger and a growing sense of injustice at actions carried out by the regime and security services. Months before the Arab Spring, police brutality in Egypt had already triggered widespread protests. The beating and killing of a young man, Khalid Said, picked up by police as he entered an internet café in Alexandria, was filmed and spread through social media. Local demonstrations spread to other towns and cities, with protests ongoing through the summer. Dozens of facebook pages sprang up expressing outrage and demanding justice, 'We Are All Khalid Said' being the most famous. People had had enough of the widespread and systemic police brutality (Lesch, 2013). There were other high profile cases of activists in Egypt brutally attacked by security services, and a growing feeling that opposition to the regime would not be tolerated (expert comment).

In Egypt, blatant rigging of the 2010 parliamentary elections gave the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP) 97% of the seats in parliament. The rigging deepened fears that Mubarak would stay on for another term, or appoint his son (Lesch, 2013). 'The increasingly likely prospect of another Mubarak presidency after the September 2011 election (either the incumbent himself or his son, Gamal) removed any faith that this process of decay would soon stop' (ICG, 2011a) – hence the resort to popular revolt in early 2011.

Dignity

The search for dignity (*karama*) is another factor that comes up again and again in the literature. 'More than anything else, the rebellions were a call for dignity and a reaction to being humiliated by arbitrary, unaccountable and increasingly predatory tyrannies' (Delacoura, 2012: p. 67). 'A unifying thread runs through all of them (*uprisings*): a call for dignity, empowerment, political citizenship, social justice, and taking back the state from presidents-for-life, as well as their families and crony capitalists who hijacked it' (Gerges, 2014).

⁸ 'The State of Emergency (*in Egypt*) consolidated the president's absolute authority by empowering him — and, by delegation, the prime minister and minister of interior — to restrain the movement of individuals, search persons or places without warrants, tap telephones, monitor and ban publications, forbid meetings and intern suspects without trial. Gatherings of more than five people were illegal. The state could choose to refer civilians not only to the criminal courts but also to Emergency State Security Courts and draconian military courts, where officers served as judges and there was no judicial appeals process' (Lesch, 2013: p. 1).

The slogan used by protestors in Egypt's Tahrir Square was 'bread, freedom and human dignity'. People were tired of being oppressed and humiliated; the psychological drive for dignity and respect was a strong feature of the Arab Spring (Ardic, 2012; Beck and Huser, 2013). The event that served as the trigger for the uprisings – the self-immolation of a Tunisian fruit vendor after he'd been humiliated at the hands of corrupt police – embodied both the mass sense of frustration and the desire for honour and respect. This applied both at the level of the individual and the country.⁹ 'For the sake of Khalid! For the sake of Egypt!' was a rallying cry in Egyptian protests at the murder by police of a young man in the street (Lesch, 2013).

3. Proximate factors

The literature identifies a number of factors that transformed what started as small, localised protests into nationwide anti-regime movements. The role of social media/communications and the actions of the armed forces were particularly pivotal in tipping the balance from localised protests into widespread unrest.

Social media

Three kinds of ICTs were significant in the Arab Spring: satellite television, cell phones and the internet. 'Digital media helped to turn individualised, localised, and community-specific dissent into a structured movement with a collective consciousness about both shared plights and opportunities for action' (Howard and Hussain, 2011). Circulation of photos and videos of the self-immolation of Muhammed Bouazizi meant people were able to empathise with his plight to a far greater extent than they would have done merely through hearing/reading about what happened (Patel, 2014).

Once the protests started, social media played a range of important roles. By spreading news of protests, it encouraged social mobilisation in other parts of the country, as well as further afield. It served as a means of communication for those engaged in uprisings: to tell each other what was happening, where abuses were, what help was needed, what the next step would be and so on. Such communication helped foster a sense of unity and common cause among what were often very disparate groups (Delacoura, 2012). Widely circulated PDFs of tip sheets explained how to pull off a successful protest (Howard and Hussain, 2011).

Social media as well as satellite phones and software tools for protecting user anonymity, were used to transmit pictures and videos of events on the ground to the international media. This, in turn, helped mobilise people in other Arab countries, led to support from diasporas and others across the world, and helped opposition movements to gain legitimacy and global recognition. This probably influenced the actions some regimes took against protestors, as well as the attitude of the international community towards those movements (Ardic, 2012). Al Jazeera, and the Qatar government which owns it, came under pressure from regime leaders in Egypt and Tunisia to stop coverage of the uprisings, but it continued to do so (Delacoura, 2012).

While the literature acknowledges the significant role of social media and communications in the Arab Spring, a number of analysts argue that this has been over-hyped (Delacoura, 2012; Lawson, 2015; expert comment). They point to low internet coverage in some parts of the affected countries, regime attempts to block internet and phone communication, and stress the importance of more basic methods of

⁹ Evidence presented to UK Parliamentary Foreign Affairs Committee: British Foreign Policy and the 'Arab Spring'. <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmselect/cmfaff/80/8006.htm>

communication and organization such as person-to-person messages. They also highlight the fact that the internet and social media were used by regimes as well, for example to identify protesters (leading to warnings by activists not to use twitter, facebook, etc. for communicating messages) (Lawson, 2015).

Demonstration effect

The timing of the Arab uprisings clearly points to a demonstration effect: Muhammed Bouazizi's self-immolation on 17 December 2010 triggered protests and the flight of Ben Ali on 14 January 2011. In Egypt, demonstrations organised for 25 January by civil society and opposition groups brought out around 20,000 participants. The protests, sit-ins and strikes spread, leading to Mubarak's resignation on 11 February. A few days later, protests against Qadhafi broke out in Libya. In Bahrain, anti-government protests erupted on 14 February. In Yemen, small-scale protests started after Ben Ali's ouster from Tunisia, and grew after Mubarak's fall. Jordan saw protests gaining momentum in late January 2011, while these started in Morocco on 20 February 2011. In Syria, the first major protests began in March 2011.

The literature confirms the influence of uprisings in Tunisia, and later Egypt, in mobilising anti-government protests and movements in other Arab countries. Thanks to media channels like Al Jazeera, as well as social media, people in other countries could see what was happening in Tunisia, Egypt and so on, and be inspired by the success of those movements. In Egypt, the removal of Ben Ali made protestors think that, if sudden change was possible in Tunisia, it might be possible in their country (Lesch, 2013) – Mubarak's resignation prompted the same sentiment in Libya, Yemen, Syria and so on.

'Events in Tunisia and Egypt have been cause for inspiration with a speed and geographic reach that defies imagination. In Yemen, their effect has been to transform the nature of social mobilisation, the character of popular demands and elites' strategic calculations. They emboldened a generation of activists who consciously mimicked their brethren's methods and demands, taking to the streets and openly calling for Saleh's ouster and regime change – aspirations many quietly backed but few had dared openly utter.' (ICG, 2011b)

Blunders in state response

In most Arab Spring countries the initial response of the regimes was to use violence and try to suppress protests by force. This back-fired, having the opposite effect of galvanizing people to join the opposition movement. In Tunisia, for example, Ben Ali sent the police out against demonstrators, to forcibly quell them. Indiscriminate police repression was the image people had of the regime, and they responded to police action by joining the demonstrations. 'Nothing did more to turn the population in favour of the uprising than the way Ben Ali chose to deal with it' (ICG, 2011d).

A similar sequence of events unfurled in Yemen. The regime employed harsh tactics, particularly in the south, arresting, beating, harassing and even killing activists. It sent security personnel and supporters dressed in civilian clothes into demonstrations to disperse protesters by wielding sticks, clubs, knives and guns. On 8 March, the army escalated the situation by using live ammunition against demonstrators, but again: 'None of these tactics appears to have worked. Violence boomeranged, enraging the youth movement and attracting more supporters to the protesters' side' (ICG, 2011b).

Another tactic used by 'moderate' (in the religious sense) regimes was to portray themselves as protectors of the rights of women and minorities, and to present the opposition as Islamists and extremists and highlight the dangers posed by them coming to power (Gerges, 2014). This was done both

for domestic consumption and to win over the international community, in particular the West. Aimed at discrediting and dividing the opposition, this tactic, too, had the opposite effect of bringing diverse opponents to the regime together and reinforcing solidarity (*ibid.*). Women played a prominent role in the uprisings; many countries saw liberals and Islamists working alongside each other for ouster of the regime.

Role of armed forces

The decision of the armed forces/security services to remain loyal to the regime or to side with protesters played a critical role in many uprisings.

In Tunisia, police initially tried to repress protests, but this receded by 10 January 2011, and the army's signal that it would not take action against protesters was an important factor in Ben Ali fleeing the country on 14 January. One expert consulted for this report suggested that the lack of harsh repression by the army was what 'tipped the balance': this made the public feel like it was safe to continue to protest and to increase their demands. Similarly, in Egypt the army's position was initially ambivalent, but it eventually opted to remove Mubarak. In both countries there were already divisions between the armed forces and the regimes. Ben Ali and Mubarak had both strengthened the security services (intelligence agencies, police, etc.) over the army: in Egypt the state security apparatus outnumbered the armed forces 3:1 (Salih, 2013). Resentment at this marginalization coupled, certainly in Egypt, with a desire to protect the army's institutional and economic interests, were important considerations in the armed forces' decision to side with the people against their rulers. Concerns about instability were another consideration (ICG, 2011a and 2011d).

In countries where the army sided with rulers, or where it was split along opposition and regime lines, the outcome was very different. Libya saw a splintering of armed forces, with some fighting for Qadhafi and others joining the rebels. The result was civil war and hundreds of death - arguably, only ended through foreign intervention (Delacoura, 2012). In Syria, strong ties between the regime and the army and security forces meant the core of the armed forces remained loyal to Bashar al-Assad (Gerges, 2014). Again the result was civil war, but, unlike in Libya, outside intervention sustained this – five years and thousands of casualties later, Syria is still at war.

Nature of protests

A number of features of opposition movements in the Arab Spring contributed to their effectiveness, and thus to protests continuing and spreading.

The first was that these were spontaneous protests. In Tunisia where the Arab Spring is considered to have started with the self-immolation of Muhammed Bouazizi, demonstrations at this death started locally and spread – driven by frustration, anger and a sense of injustice stemming from all the structural factors described earlier, and fanned by social media. There was no readymade opposition waiting to take advantage of public anger and activism; the protests were not organized by or associated with any political party. Once protests started, civil society groups such as trade unions and teachers' associations did play a *supportive* role (ICG, 2011d), but they certainly did not lead or drive the movements.

Secondly, the 'figureheads' of the Arab Spring in popular consciousness, whom people identified with and drew inspiration from, were not political leaders or famous activists, but ordinary citizens – Bouazizi in Tunisia, Khalid Said in Egypt and other victims of regime oppression. Thirdly, the 'ideology' behind the uprisings was a simple determination to oust corrupt regimes and promote social justice and *karama*

(dignity). The Arab Spring was not driven by any political ideology (left-wing, right-wing, etc.); nor by the anti-US, anti-West, anti-Israel sentiment behind previous large-scale protests in the region; nor by religion – the Arab Spring was not characterised by calls for Islamic government (Delacoura, 2012). This is not to say that Islam played no role; it did, but (from a behavioural perspective) it was primarily psychological (strengthening the resolve of individual protesters) rather than organisational (Hoffman and Jamal, 2014). Moreover, mosques served as important centres for organizing protests, feeding and providing medical treatment to protesters, etc.

These traits were significant because they allowed very disparate groups in society to come together. The demand for regime change and social justice was an inclusive appeal that united secularists, conservatives, rural and urban groups, different ethnic groups, and so on. The spontaneous, grassroots nature of the protests made it hard for regimes to counter: there were no obvious leaders for them to round up and thereby 'decapitate' opposition movements. There were no political parties for them to do deals with and try to win over and there were no organized groups for the regime to try to split and exploit divisions among (ICG, 2011a).

Tactics such as mass sit-ins in Tahrir Square and the general approach (at least initially in Tunisia and Egypt) of peaceful protest, enhanced the appeal of the opposition movement and its image domestically and internationally, and made it harder for armed forces to take action against them. As the number of protesters in Tahrir Square grew from tens to hundreds of thousands the security forces gradually withdrew. The experience of spending time together in such sit-ins, and of collectively organizing their own security, food, medical treatment and so on, also served to unify people and promote solidarity (Ardic, 2012).

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