

Three lessons from the Arab Spring

Written by Stefan Wolff

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STEFAN WOLFF, NOV 26 2011

When Mohamed Bouazizi, a jobless graduate in the provincial city of Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, about 200km southwest of the capital Tunis, set himself on fire on 18 December 2010 after police had confiscated a cart from which he was selling fruit and vegetables, few would have predicted that this event would spark the phenomenon we now refer to as the Arab Spring. Protests quickly escalated in Tunisia and within four weeks Tunisian President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali had to flee to Saudi Arabia having failed to stop the protests either by repression or promises of reform.

On 17 January, one day after Ben Ali's departure, another young man set himself afire near the Egyptian parliament. Within a week, coordinated mass protests began in Tahrir Square, and forced the resignation of long-serving Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who handed power to the military on 11 February.

Since then, the transitions in Tunisia and Egypt have made at best incremental progress in some areas. In Tunisia, the first elections anywhere as a result of the Arab Spring went ahead in October and the newly elected parliament had its inaugural session on 22 November. The election winners, the moderate Islamist party Ennahda (Renaissance) will have a coalition arrangement with a liberal and a centre-left party. While Tunisia avoided the appalling violence that characterised the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen, the new government and parliament still face an up-hill battle in the transition to a more democratic political system, including drafting a new constitution.

In Egypt, the military was instrumental in pushing Mubarak out of office, but the slow progress towards democratic reforms, several deadly sectarian clashes between Islamists and Christian copts, tensions and violence on the border with Israel, and a heavy-handed police crack-down on continuing protests in Tahrir Square do not bode well for the country's immediate future—even if parliamentary elections go ahead on 28 November. While the army seems keen not to want to actually govern the country, they seem equally determined not to give up their privileged position that gives them political influence and control over significant economic assets.

Elsewhere in the Arab world, it seems as if the old regimes are determined to hold on to power at all cost, and despite diminishing chances of success. In Yemen, a crisis that had engulfed the regime of President Ali Abdullah Saleh long before the Arab Spring began is nowhere closer to a resolution even after Saleh at long last agreed to a transition plan sponsored by the Gulf Cooperation Council. This plan saw Saleh hand over power to his Vice President (not the opposition), allows him to retain the title of President for another three months, guaranteed him immunity, and left his assets untouched and members of his family in charge of most of the government's hard power. Forcing Saleh out of office does also not address at least two of the country's major crises—the Houthi rebellion in the North and the secessionist insurgency in the south, the latter of which has formed an alliance of convenience with al-Qaeda in the Arab Peninsula. Unsurprisingly, violence in Yemen has continued unabated since Saleh signed the GCC transition plan on 23 November.

In Syria, Bashar al-Assad has, so far successfully, clung onto power regardless of the mounting death toll among protesters. Like elsewhere in the Arab Spring, an initially peaceful protest movement has turned into an armed insurgency, but one that lacks a unified political opposition. The Arab League has increased pressure on the Assad regime, albeit not unanimously and so far only threatens sanctions, while France, in an eerie déjà vu of events in Libya, has called for humanitarian corridors and safe zones inside Syria to protect civilians from an ever more violent

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regime crack-down and has recognised the opposition. All the signs at the moment are pointing at further escalation in Syria and possibly another international military intervention.

Libya continues to stand apart from all other countries in the Arab world in which people took to the streets to demand freedom, jobs and democracy. But the reasons for this are no longer all positive. The country remains divided and an Interim Government was only sworn in on 24 November, after weeks of protracted power struggles, tensions and occasionally serious violence between various armed groups that once made up the patch-work of rebel factions that ousted Gadhafi. Already Berber groups have suspended any cooperation with the National Transitional Council as they resent what they see as their under-representation in the new cabinet. At the same time, question marks remain over the apprehension and killing of Colonel Gadhafi and whether the Libyan justice system is able to give a fair trial for his son, Saif al-Islam, even after the International Criminal Court has accepted that he can be tried in Libya. On top of all that, serious and credible allegations persist about abuses of former regime supporters. Libya might yet turn a corner toward a stable and more democratic political system, but the obstacles in the way of such a transition are mounting.

Almost one year on from the beginning of the Arab Spring it may be too early to judge its outcome, but some crucial lessons should be borne in mind on the road ahead:

1. Transitions from authoritarian rule are, for the most part, violent affairs in which all sides are likely to commit abuses. Pushed into a corner regimes desperately cling onto power; once victorious, rebels find it hard to resist exacting revenge on members and supporters of the old regime.
2. Disparate rebel movements are united at best in their desire to get rid of the old regime, but what motivates their members is a whole range of different causes and more often than not there is no common vision for the future among them.
3. As a result, the departure of the old regime does not automatically lead to peace, stability and democracy.

It will take years, if not decades, for us to understand in full the consequences of the Arab Spring. But local leaders and activists in the Middle East and North Africa, regional and international organisations like the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council, the European Union and the United Nations all have a responsibility to make sure that the revolutions of the Arab Spring in the end improve the living conditions of the people in the region rather than install just a different brand of self-serving rulers that only pay lip-service to human rights, democracy, and individuals' well-being.

This will be a long and at times frustrating endeavour, and while we must remain realistic about the speed and comprehensiveness of its success, we should remain equally committed and determined in our support of the genuine democratic aspirations of the people who have started these revolutions.

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