

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/04/15/economic-crisis-political-repression-and-geopolitics-in-the-middle-east/>

MILAD JAVDAN, APR 15 2011

### Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics

#### *Introduction*

The recent wave of democratization in the Middle East has dominated political discourse in recent months. Following the social uprising that toppled Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's regime in Tunisia on January 11, 2011, to the recent social unrest in Libya to oust the 40 year old reign of Muammar Gadhafi, many political scientists have been left puzzled as to reasons behind the North African revolutionary movement and where it could spread in the coming weeks. The most puzzling aspect of these events is the premise that the successful populist revolution that led to the resignation of Hosni Mubarak on February 11, 2011 was the trigger for other revolution attempts in the region—notably Libya that began just days after the fall of Mubarak's regime.

The underlying argument of this paper is to investigate whether unrest in Tunisia and Egypt triggered the revolution attempt in Libya. To answer this question this study begins with a brief overview of the conceptual framework of revolutions by taking a look at some of the prevalent commentaries on the subject. A brief literature review on indicators of revolutions will headway the next segment as two independent variables –*Economic Crisis* and *Political Repression* – will be explored as catalysts to popular uprisings. While each revolution attempt is different in intensity and duration this section will attempt to clarify the mystified conception of populist movements, but also, to lay the ground work for understanding the sweeping revolutionary movement across the Middle East.

#### *Conceptualization*

The term “revolution” has been variously defined within the social science discourse. Scholastic commentary on this definition is discernable in three broad areas. The first relates to revolutions as a *political phenomenon*. Nesta Webster, for example, suggests that political connotations of social movements are underlined by “crowd activities which prepares for, leads up to, carries, and emerges from revolutions.”[1]

Second, a revolution as abrupt social change broadly refers to any sudden or apparent change in social, economic, and political environment of a given state. This view has been purported by Gustav Le Bon and Charles Ellwood, who suggest that political discontinuity or revolution is all but one part of broader causes of revolutions. Le Bon, for example, asserts that the definition must be extended to include “all sudden transformations, or transformations apparently sudden, whether of beliefs, ideas, or doctrines.”[2]

Third, broader definitions of revolutions attempt to provide a macro-level framework of social change that encompasses, among others, political, social, economic religious or industrial aspects. A proponent of this view, Henry Hyndman, has made explicit statements that define revolutions as successful only when they include “change in all the various aspects of social existence.”[3] These aspects may range from institutional reform in political atmosphere, cultural change in the society or economic transformation in industrialized revolutions.

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

Aside from these definitions, there is an abundance of literature that specifically concentrates on the psychological factors of group mobilization and the role of the individual psyche to spearhead social movements. The convolution that currently surrounds definitions of revolution has led some authors to advocate for a narrow micro-level conceptualization. Milton Yinger and Mark Katz, for instance, suggest that the variance in perspectives essentially stem from the multifaceted causes of revolutions—whether populist or elitist driven—or the consequences and post-revolution political environment.[4] In their study, they present a narrower, more concise, and accurate definition, which, combined with Peter Calvert's definition, will serve as the working conceptual framework of this article. The reason for choosing this expansive definition is that it allows for elitist revolutionary movements and coup d'états in the framework. For the purpose of this article, then, revolutions encompass three vital elements:

1. A process in which the political direction of a state becomes increasingly discredited in the eyes of either the population as a whole or certain key sections of it;
2. A change of government (transition) at a clearly defined point in time by use or threat of use of armed force.[5]
3. A legitimate interim government following the revolution—whether mythical or factual public belief of legitimacy.[6]

## *Accelerators for Revolutions*

The following segment will examine the indicators that serve as a catalyst for social unrest and successful regime change. The reason for including these specific factors is that the cases studied in this section all had similar conditions present—*Economic Crisis* and *Political Repression*— that resulted in successful regime change. Some of these cases—Russia, Mexico, and Cuba— were chosen from a list of Great Revolutions that have made their mark in history both in magnitude of mass mobilisation and the level of drastic political change that followed the uprising. A word of caution: to say that these factors are necessary conditions for revolutions is misleading. The contention here is based on the premise that the following elements have been present in revolution-prone states before the outbreak of civil violence that eventually led to regime change.

## *State Repression*

Repressive states are most likely to experience revolutionary movements. This phenomenon exclusively deals with the notion that when a state loses legitimacy, it experiences increased opposition. With increased opposition, authoritarian states often resort to even more repressive means to immobilise the opposition.[7] This cyclic character of repression has been the reason for the downfall of various non-democratic states. Theda Skocpol furthers this relationship by stating that the increased use of repression results in withdrawal of aid, or imposition of sanctions by the international community that further hinders regime survival.[8] As Robert Jackman argues, a weakened government may result in higher levels of challenge by political dissidents that often results in collective protests.[9] The most prominent targeting strategy used by non-democratic governments, as Bary Schutz and Robert Slater propose, is one confined to leadership of the opposition.[10] Often, this is the first step of repression taken by the regime and depending on the outcome and people's resilience may result in targeting the civilian population.

Claude Welch and Mavis Taintor attribute precipitation of internal wars—a synonymous term used in their study of political revolutions—to the presence of the following factors:

- Estrangement of rulers from the societies they rule;
- Violent and collective response to bad government – government in which performs inadequately the function of goal-attainment
- Division among the governing body on methods to control the uprising – often leading to use of excessive force;
- Excessive toleration of alienated groups.[11]

Examples of political violence are a reoccurring theme in the revolutionary discourse. Demonstrators in Paris in 1848,

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

for example, were fired upon with live ammunition, killing 20 protesters. Their feelings of injustice served as the catalyst for a revolutionary movement that ousted the monarchy of Louis Philippe.[12] Similar repressive policies were present in Russia. From 1900 to 1917 virtually all political dissidents were met with harsh responses, often owing its method of control to mass killings of protesters and strikers. Such was the case in January 22, 1905 when workers, infuriated with the Tsar's decision to go to war peacefully gathered at the Emperor's palace in St. Petersburg. What was later termed "Bloody Sunday", the events that followed manifested themselves through an indiscriminate response by Russian troops guarding the Palace. The response ignited strikes and armed clashes all over Russia. Workers were united by a common cause—to oust the Tsarist government. Combined with Lenin's charisma and his untarnished belief in revolution, the socialist revolution in Russia prevailed as Lenin returned from exile to establish order 1917.

In a more recent case, some scholars argue that the Iranian Islamic revolution in 1979 would not have succeeded if it wasn't for the widespread terror and repression by Shah's secret police—the *Savak*—at the outset of the uprising. From arbitrary imprisonment of protesters to severe repression of clerics and banishment of Ayatollah Khomeini from Iranian territory, the last monarch of Iran resorted to extreme means of violence to consolidate its slippery grasp on power. The result was violent protests, riots, and a massive social movement that welcomed the returning of the Ayatollah by the millions in Tehran.

## *Economic Crisis*

Virtually all successful revolutions have stemmed from economic inequalities and deprivation of marginalized groups of society. Scholars have readily attributed this factor to include poverty, rapid economic decline and imbalances between production and distribution of goods.[13] In her study of revolutions in Latin America, Cynthia McClintock argues that the discrepancy between domestic and global markets results in dependence of the former on the latter in terms of reliance on industrialized states for capital and technology.[14] Schutz and Slater assert that this dependence essentially triggers the stratification of society and deprivation of rural population since:

Over time, the unfavourable terms of trade that accrues to nations in the periphery of the world economy serve to retard and distort the growth and diversification of the economy, polarize the distribution of wealth and income, and disrupt the traditional mechanisms by which rural and urban masses assured themselves of some margin of subsistence.[15]

Economic deterioration was the hallmark for the revolutionary movement in Ghana in 1972 as a military coup overturned one of the last parliamentary governments remaining in post-colonial Africa. The catalyst for the economic downturn was the lagging agricultural production and exportation of natural commodities that resulted in large trade imbalance, a massive foreign debt, and exponentially higher rates of unemployment.[16] Similarly, in Poland, the economic crisis of 1970s and 1980s ignited massive riots and high levels of violence that targeted even political elites that were genuinely concerned with the wellbeing of the middle and working classes.[17] Neil Smelser summarizes the close relationship between economic crisis and violence:

Economic factors, such as abrupt food shortages, unemployment, rising prices, and falling wages are closely associated with outburst of violence in context so diverse as the French Revolution, lower-class riots in 17th century Mexico and England, food riots in 18th century England, Luddite violence in 19th century England, American labour disturbances in the 19th and 20th centuries, American nativism, and peasant uprising in Japan toward the end of the Tokugawa period.[18]

The economic crisis that Mexico experienced at the end of Diaz's reign was one of the prominent factors that contributed to the Mexican revolution in 1911. Faced with lack of foreign investment, raising inflation and unprecedented unemployment rates, the last four years of the *Porfiriato* saw Mexico spiral down in stagnation and decline. Various authors also attribute the decline in Mexican economy to the abrupt world prices of sugar (Mexico's main export). The drop in prices was attributed to United States' tariffs imposed on Mexican planters and the emergence of new growers in Cuba.[19] These events highly impacted the Morelos[20] growers and saw the region suffer starvation and increased level of poverty in a short period of time. The events that unfolded in Morelos were

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

reflective of the broader Mexican agricultural disaster.

Similarly, in Cuba, the over-reliance on sugar as an economic stimulus resulted in alarming levels of unemployment and economic decline once exports to the United States decreased. The economic crisis during the late 1950s was solely attributed to sugar plantation and ensuing unemployment rates. Cuba has traditionally enjoyed a favourable climate for growing sugar. However, the economy of Cuba “came to center almost exclusively on this single crop; a crop that had to be sold in foreign markets unable to absorb all that could be produced.”[21] Plantation workers were marginalized by corporations and state policies that allocated much of the earnings to a few elites while the working class starved. Ironically, Cuba—one of the richest agricultural countries in the world—struggled to feed itself as the entire national economy was dependent on the production of sugar. This over-reliance on single-track industry, combined with corruption and favouritism by the Batista government also resulted in rising unemployment rates—especially during non-growing seasons. As Cuban wages failed to keep up with inflationary rates in the 1950s, the standard of living in Cuba decreased dramatically.

The relationship between regime legitimacy and economic instability is further strengthened since often lack of the government to deal with these crises in an efficient manner often results in loss of public support for the elites. This symbiotic relationship is one of the reasons why many view economic crisis and illegitimate use of force by the state as key ingredients in revolutionary movements.

## *Revolutionary Movements in North Africa*

The following section specifically deals with the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. In Tunisia the social uprising resulting in the toppling of the Ben Ali regime on January 11, 2011 that sparked the two subsequent revolutionary movements in Egypt on January 25 and Libya on February 20<sup>th</sup>. While the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences were successful in overturning the Mubarak regime, the Libyan attempt—at the time of the writing of this article—is on-going and gaining momentum. As we guide our discussion through these cases, it is important to keep in mind the indicators of revolutions discussed above as they are investigated. This section will end with a brief discussion on the geopolitical and demographic factors that may aid our analysis in understanding the link between the first two cases and their effect on triggering social uprising in Libya.

### *Tunisian Republic*

Since independence in 1956, Tunisia has experienced steady economic growth. Sound social and economic planning has yielded favourable results for the North African state as investments in human capita and family planning has improved per capita income and raised living standards considerably in a region where economic stagnation and alarming poverty levels are a norm. Policy reforms directed to integrate the Tunisian economy with its global counterpart has created a favourable condition for foreign investment that resulted in even higher levels of economic growth. Even during the global economic meltdown, Tunisia experienced a GDP growth of 4.6 percent in 2008—as opposed to -0.6 percent in the European Union—and 3 percent in 2009.[22]

These advancements notwithstanding, Tunisia’s unemployment rate remains alarmingly high. Studies done on the puzzling inverse correlation stipulate that the reasoning behind raising GDP levels and the consistency of the unemployment rate is due to lack of initiatives to foster an atmosphere to integrate educated youth.[23] Economic policy reforms since the 1970s resulted in higher access to education. By providing free education to youth, Tunisia experienced a spike in literacy rates and higher enrolment into post-secondary education. The overwhelming entrance of skilled graduates into the workforce by the turn of the millennium was no match for the job creation policies that made its positive mark on the Tunisian economy a decade earlier. As recent graduates struggled to find skilled jobs, the unemployment for the youth skyrocketed to 30% in 2008 while the national average stood at 14%. The proportion of youth among total unemployed reached 72% in 2009 with no clear signs of reduction.[24]

It is no surprise that the majority of the population that took the streets of Tunis on December 17, 2010 were the youth. The attempted suicide by a detainee ignited the unplanned but organic uprising that toppled the President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali’s 23 year reign:

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

Mohammad Bouazizi, a 26 year-old, doused himself with gasoline and set himself on fire after a female police officer slapped and spat on him. The only crime Bouazizi committed was that of being a street vendor selling vegetables and fruits without a permit, in a country where neoliberal economic policies failed to provide economic opportunities to Bouazizi and thousands of others like him.[25]

Police brutality and humiliation is not a new phenomenon in Tunisia. For decades its citizens have been subjected to repressive government policies, arbitrary use of force and detention, and murder. Virtually all dissidents in Tunisia were met with harsh responses that often dictated their status as “missing” and their faith as “unknown.”

In other instances, trade unions were severely clamped on and their leaders imprisoned to minimize any collective action taken against the government. Ben Ali made it clear to the public that any attempts to mobilize against the government—even through peaceful means—would be met with a harsh response. In numerous other cases political prisoners were often held in solitary confinement for years without interruption. As Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports, these policies also extended to the members of the opposition Islamist Party. In its 2004 report on arbitrary imprisonment in Tunisia, HRW found that:

The actual conditions that the inmates experience in long-term solitary confinement – the absence of normal social interaction, of reasonable mental stimulus, and exposure to the natural world – is potentially harmful to their mental health. It is also a violation of the prohibition against cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment or punishment and, in some cases, may rise to the level of torture.[26]

Excessive and indiscriminate use of force was the primary mean for Ben Ali's method of power consolidation during his reign. These means were raised to unprecedented levels during the collective uprising in December. Security forces willingly resorted to the use of live ammunition to disperse crowds. Amnesty International reported that the shots fired at the protesters were deliberate and intentional since those that were killed were running away and suffered wounds in the back of the head.[27] The overwhelming evidence that came out of Tunisia was indicative of the same methods used to quell protesters.

## *Arab Republic of Egypt*

The uprising in Egypt that toppled the Mubarak regime on February 11, 2011 has been linked to worsening economic factors that have played Egypt for decades. Data shows that double-digit unemployment and a stagnating economic growth were readily present prior to the popular uprising that left its mark as the second successful revolution in North Africa in the span of thirty days.[28] The indicators for worsening Egyptian economy is attributed to poverty, unemployment, and inflation

Data gathered on Egypt's economy indicates that 44% of the population lived under \$2 per day. The alarming poverty rate also shows that the top 20% of the population receives 41% of the national income whereas 80% receive the remaining 59%.[29] The World Bank estimates the headcount of those who live below the poverty line at 16% of the general population.[30] Also noteworthy is the plunging national income of Egypt months before the uprising. In May of 2010 the figure dropped \$1,200—a 73% plunge from \$4,300 in 1981.[31]

Unemployment rate in Egypt has seen some improvement in recent years but still hovers around 11% in 2010.[32] During the 30 year Mubarak's reign, Egypt has witnessed its unemployment rate increase from 5.2% in 1981 to an astonishing 22.3% in 1995—yielding an average of 9.1% since 1981.[33] Combined with the income disparity mentioned above, unemployment has posed a constant impediment to the quality of life in the lower income bracket of the Egyptian population.

Inflation has also been a concern for the Egyptian economy—especially for those who live below the poverty line. The volatility of inflation rate has seen the figure rise from 9.1% in 1981 to 33.2% in 1987, only to drop to and impressive 1% in 2003 and climbing back to 10% in 2010—averaging at 10.3% in 30 years.[34]

Mubarak has ruled Egypt with an iron fist for 30 years—using repressive measures and excess use of force to silent

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

opposition in alarming rates. The most organized and formidable opposition group that has been relentlessly trying to mobilise are the Islamists. Since 1981, they have been met with harsh response from Mubarak that often includes arbitrary arrests, torture, and execution. In the mid-1980s, for example, Mubarak's secret police were arresting up to 100 Islamist militants per day to deny them any involvement in the political landscape of Egypt. [35] Islamist militants here are categorized under three groups: *The Muslim Brotherhood*, *Jihadi*, and *takfiri*. The Brotherhood share moderate views on regime change while the latter two are more radical and often resorted to violent means to weaken Mubarak's rule.

Studies conducted by Amnesty International have readily attributed the silencing of political dissidents as a political norm in Egypt. Repressive measures have been used by Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, and Mubarak to consolidate their power. Sadat, for example, raised the level of crackdowns during his reign to include detaining and executing Islamist militants, journalists, students, university faculties, and lawyers.[36] Mubarak, in 1993 following an assassination attempt of then-Prime Minister Atef Sedki, rounded up and executed 600 militants in the ensuing five years[37].

Repressive measures in Mubarak's Egypt also extended to the civilian population. Arbitrary detention, torture, and executions were just some of the measures used by the elite to monopolize their power. Torture was especially of concern in the prisons of Egypt. A study conducted by the Human Rights Watch conveys its widespread use:

Torture is now used for a long list of reasons, including to intimidate or recruit police informers, to discipline or punish at the behest of a third party, to force a citizen to renounce an apartment or plot of land, as part of a hostage-taking policy that usually nets women and children related to a suspect, and to punish those who dare to challenge policemen's absolute authority or demand to see judicial warrants or arrest and search orders.[38]

The barrage of news reports coming from Egypt indicated that the level of arbitrary arrests and torture rose significantly during the recent popular uprising before decreasing moderately after Mubarak's resignation. With the military upholding social order in post-Mubarak Egypt, coupled with the long history of repressive policies, there are no guarantees the these repressive measures will cease.

## *Libyan Republic*

Libya's demographics are somewhat different than those of Tunisia and Egypt. Having a population of only 6.8 million with roughly the same land area as the other two North African states, the numbers of those affected are lower but their proportion is just as alarming. Despite having one of the highest economic growths in Africa, poor economic policies and socio-economic marginalization of Libyans have resulted in a weakened economy. Demographics show that, as of 2006, *half* of Libya's population is under the age of 20.[39] Having an unemployment rate of 17.3% as of 2003[40], the significance of this group entering the work force could very well propel this figure into high 20s. Combined with

Gadhafi's continuing reliance on the oil sector for exports—a figure standing at 95%—the Libyan youth will most likely struggle to successfully integrate into the economy. This over-reliance on a single track economy has also perverted other industrial developments. [41]

The other problem that has affected the Libyan population is the raising inflation rates in recent years. While in 2003 and 2004 inflation rates dropped 2.3%, it rose steadily from 3.4 in 2006 and a worrying 12% in 2008. This sharp increase in inflation may be attributed to the accruing foreign debt that accumulated from \$5000 USD at the turn of the millennium to over \$40,000 USD in 2009.[42] It may also be a result of the very high food prices in 2008 and the global economic meltdown. While inflation rates will most likely decrease in coming years due to stabilizing of the global economy, it still remained a significant issue for majority of the Libyan population prior to the February 17 uprising.

Repressive state policies have been the hallmark of Gadhafi's power monopolization since he took office in 1969. Considered as one of the longest reigns in history, the longevity of Gadhafi's 42 year rule has been characterized by

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

a wide array of human rights violations. Arbitrary detention of political dissidents, torture and murder are just some of the methods that have been used to quell even minor attempts to challenge Gadhafi's monopoly on power. While the attempt here is to highlight the major cases involving grave human rights breaches, it is important to keep in mind that Gadhafi has ruled Libya for over four decades. Accordingly, the governmental actions that violate the very basic principle of international human rights are norms rather than exceptions in Libya. The following cases are the most pressing ones that have found their way to news headlines and human rights NGOs' reports.

Despite some minor improvements in recent years, the government still bans political opposition groups. A study conducted by the Human Rights Watch in 2005 revealed that Gadhafi's methods for power consolidation is two pronged. First, from establishing power in 1969 until 1988 the government of Libya overtly imprisoned and tortured any opposition groups that challenged the status quo. Amidst international pressure to adhere to human rights principles, Gadhafi's Libya became a state party to the Additional Protocol of the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) in 1988 and subsequently became a signatory to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT). This somewhat surprising conformance was short-lived as only a few months after signing, Gadhafi resorted back to his repressive strategies. Amnesty International notes that

The door of reform closed quickly, and 1989 saw another wave of internal repression. According to Amnesty International, which had visited the country in 1988, the government instituted mass arbitrary arrest and detention, 'disappearances,' torture, and the death penalty.[43]

Second, In 1999, Gadhafi instituted anti torture laws into the national legislation that resulted in an insurgence of legitimate and armed opposition groups. As Human Rights Watch suggests, this backlash means that currently "the government primarily employs the rhetoric of antiterrorism to imprison critics. Armed Islamic opposition groups exist, but the government has used them to justify the silencing of legitimate political dissent." [44] This tactic gives Gadhafi a blank cheque to use whatever means at his disposal to detain, torture, and execute political opposition groups as well as the civilian population that challenged his rule.

The recent uprising in Libya and the response by the government is the best indicator in understanding the level of political repression in Libya. The use of the military, including tanks and jetfighters, on the civilian population during the protests that followed the successful revolution in Egypt was sobering on many accounts. Gadhafi's actions have made it clear that he will not relinquish power by any means unless if he is forced to do so. The initial US and the subsequent NATO-led coalition military campaigns in Libya may be a way of forcefully removing Gadhafi from power depending on how much resources the coalition have at their disposal in the campaign.

## *North African Demographics and Geopolitics*

It is troublesome to provide an empirical understanding of the domino effect in regime change in the Middle East. Reports now indicate that similar movements are occurring in Bahrain, Yemen, Jordan, and Syria. One approach that may aid in understanding this wave of uprising in the region is by considering North African demographics and geopolitics.

Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya all share borders and are located in the northern most part of continental Africa. This would mean that the level of migration between the countries is high enough for us to infer that they share some kind of social, cultural, and religious values. While almost all Middle Eastern states are comprised of majority Arab population, Tunisia and Libya are home to the *Berber* population. Berbers have been indigenous to northern Africa for over 2000 years and have co-existed with the Arab population for centuries to the point where most demographics records convey them as one figure specifically in Tunisia (92%), and Libya (97%). [45] While the Berber population is relatively smaller in Egypt, they still form a significant minority population in the south-western part of the country.

This racial integration may lead to sympathetically motivated actions that find their roots in neighbouring countries. The geographical location of Libya may also be an indication as it is located between Tunisia and Egypt. The latter's successful uprising in the span of few months may have laid the foundation for the revolution attempt in Libya. The

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

refugee movement during the violent protests in Tunisia and Egypt into Libya has also blurred the physical boundaries between the three states.

The size of the youth population may also contribute to raising the likelihood of collective action against the government in the three states. According to the Population Reference Bureau, in Tunisia the population under 30 stands at 53% of the general population; in Egypt 51%, and in Libya 58%. [46] Combined with the economic marginalization that this age group is subjected to, it is no surprise that the majority of those who took the streets in their respective uprisings were the youth. Lack of sound governmental policies to address growing unemployment rates often lays the foundation for defiance for educated youth entering the workforce.

The political landscape in the three states also warrants elaboration. Specifically, the longevity of the regimes have subjected their respective population to constant repression and deteriorating living conditions. Tunisia's Ben Ali ruled for 24 years; Mubarak led Egypt for 30, and Gadhafi maintained his power for 42. The social, political, and economic toll on these populations was surely a factor in igniting the uprisings. The worsening economic prosperity—specifically unemployment and raising poverty rates— and the increasing repressive measures—i.e. silencing any attempt for change—in span of decades can lead to aggressive behaviour and collective violence with minimal catalysis.

Any of these independent variables may further our understanding in explaining the influence regime change in Tunisia and Egypt had on the revolution attempt in Libya. By sharing demographical and geopolitical landscapes, the three states share a number of characteristics. However, this contention is not to say that these characteristics served as *the* catalyst for the uprising in Libya. The proportion of youth to the general population in the Middle East and North Africa as a whole more or less convey the same figures. This population bulge inevitably leads to high unemployment rates as emerging economies find it difficult to provide adequate amount of jobs to meet the demand. Similarly, the Berber population extends significantly to Morocco and Algeria. The longevity of rulers, too, is a hallmark of African politics where corruption is rampant and free elections rare. The purpose behind including this section was to provide other possible linkages between the revolutionary movements and examine whether or not regime change in Tunisia and Egypt influenced the uprising in Libya.

## Conclusion

This article attempted to account for possible reasons behind the uprising in Libya and ascertain whether or not the events that unfolded in Tunisia and Egypt served as facilitators for regime change in Libya. It may be plausible to conclude that the combination of independent variables mentioned in this article can most prominently explain the influence Egypt and Tunisia had on Libya. The presence of *Economic Crisis*, *Political Repression*, and *Demographics* in all three states were contributing factors to their respective uprisings.

The two variables that have been consistent throughout the past two centuries in successful revolutions were discussed. Economic crisis and political repression were shown to have a positive correlation for regime change. For the former, unemployment was the consistent attribute, whereas for the latter, repression of political dissidents – whether organized opposition parties or sporadic protests – was the most prominent index. These two independent variables alone do not convey a causal relationship with regime change. Rather, they are indicators—or “accelerators”—of revolutionary movement.

The discussion on North African demographics indicated that the three states share some level cultural, racial, and religious identity that may contribute to popular uprising. Their bulging youth population combined with lack of employment opportunities were clear indicators of dissatisfaction among the majority of the population. The geographical location of the three states was also mentioned. Libya's location between Tunisia and Egypt surely conveys some sort of geopolitical dimension to the uprising in the former. Each of the independent variables mentioned in this section can very well pose the answer to our question.

Future research must empirically test the demographic element of regional revolutionary movements. Longitudinal studies may paint a telling picture of attitudes of youth towards government legitimacy whereas cross-sectional



# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

studies could suggest how different races and age groups perceive governmental authority in the face of economic marginalization and political repression.

---

*Milad Javdan received his MA in Political Science from University of Waterloo in 2010. His research interests primarily focus on the intersection between international human rights Law and cultural relativism in the Middle East and North Africa, the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, and the principle of state sovereignty.*

## References

African Development Bank Group "African Fixed Income Guidebook, May 2007.

Amnesty International, *Tunisia in Revolt: State Violence During Anti-Government Protests*, 2011.

Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Finance, *Egypt Economic Monitor* 7, 2010.

Calvert, P., *Revolution and International Politics*, (London: Frances Printer Publishing, 1984).

Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2010: Promoting high-level sustainable growth to reduce unemployment in Africa*, 2011.

Economic Research Center, Grammy, *The Economics of The Egyptian Revolution*, February 14, 2011, accessed: March 30, 2011, URL: [http://www.csub.edu/kej/documents/weekly\\_updates/2011-02-14.pdf](http://www.csub.edu/kej/documents/weekly_updates/2011-02-14.pdf).

Greene, Thomas H., *Comparative Revolutionary Movements* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishing, 1990).

Hyndman, Henry M., *The Evolution of Revolution*. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1921).

Huberman, L. *Cuba: An Anatomy of Revolution* (N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1961)

Human Rights Watch, *Tunisia: Long-Term Solitary Confinement of Political Prisoners*, 16 (2004): 1-85.

Human Rights Watch, *Libya: Words or Deeds – The Urgent Need for Human Rights Reform* 18(2006): 1-87.

Human Rights Watch, *Work on Him Until He Confesses: Impunity for Torture in Egypt*, 2011.

Index Mundi, *Egypt Country Profile*. URL: <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=eg&v=74>. Retrieved March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2011.

Jackman, Robert W. "Response: Response to Alrich's "Rational Choice and Turnout": Rationality and Political Participation." *American Journal of Political Science*, 37 (1993): 279-290.

Krecji, J. *Great Revolutions Compared: The Outline of a Theory*. Toronto: Harvester Wheatsheaf Press, 1994.

Le Bon, G. *The Psychology of Revolutions*. Trans. By B. Miall. (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001).

McClintock, C. *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path*. Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998.

Mitchell, Neil J. and McCormick, James M., "Economic and Political Explanations of Human

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

Rights Violations." *World Politics*, 40 (1988): 478-498.

Population Reference Bureau, Country Profiles: *Egypt, Libya and Tunisia*. URL: <http://www.prb.org/>. Retrieved: March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011.

Saleh. B., "Tunisia: IMF "Economic Medicine" has resulted in Mass Poverty and Unemployment : Protests by suicide as a Symbol of Resistance," *Global Research* (2010), accessed: March 30, 2011, URL: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=22587>

Schutz, Bary M. and Slater, Robert O. *Revolution and Political Change in the Third World*, (London: Adamantine Press Limited, 1990).

Skocpol, T. *State and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Sorenson, D. S. "Dynamics of Political Dissent in Egypt," *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 27 (2003): 207-228.

The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, Abaza, K. *Political Islam and Regime Survival in Egypt*, Policy Focus 51 (2006)

The World Bank, *Egypt Country Profile*, accessed March 30, 2011, URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/egypt-arab-republic>.

The World Bank, *Libya Country Profile*, accessed March 30, 2011, URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/libya>.

The World Factbook, *Country Profiles: Libya and Tunisia*, accessed March 31, 2011, URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ly.html>,

Webster, Nesta H., *World Revolution: The Plot Against Civilization* (London: Constable & Co. 1922).

Yinger, M. and Katz, M., "Revolution: Refining and Defining." *Journal of Group Tensions*, 30 (2001): 349-367.

[1] Nesta H. Webster, *World Revolution: The Plot Against Civilization* (London: Constable & Co., 1922), 6.

[2] Gustav Le Bon, *The Psychology of Revolutions*. Trans. By B. Miall. (Kitchener: Batoche Books, 2001), 41.

[3] Henry M. Hyndman, *The Evolution of Revolution*. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1921), 12.

[4] Milton Yinger and Mark Katz, "Revolution: Refining and Defining." *Journal of Group Tensions*, 30 (2001): 349-367.

[5] Peter Calvert, *Revolution and International Politics*, (London: Frances Printer Publishing, 1984), 3

[6] Yinger and Katz, "Revolution: Refining and Defining," 351.

[7] Neil J. Mitchell and James M. McCormick, "Economic and Political Explanations of Human Rights Violations," *World Politics* 40 (1988): 478-498.

[8] Theda Skocpol, *State and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

[9] Robert W. Jackman, "Response: Response to Alrich's "Rational Choice and Turnout": Rationality and Political Participation," *American Journal of Political Science* 37 (1993): 279-290.

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

- [10] Bary M. Schutz and Robert O. Slater, *Revolution and Political Change in the Third World*, (London: Adamantine Press Limited, 1990).
- [11] Schutz and Slater, *Revolutions and Political Change in the Third World*, 24.
- [12] Jaroslav Krecji, *Great Revolutions Compared: The Outline of a Theory*, (Toronto: Harvester Wheatsheaf Press, 1994)
- [13] Claude E. Welch and Mavis B. Taintor, *Revolution and Political Change*, (California: Wadsworth Publishing, 1972), 149.
- [14] Cynthia McClintock, *Revolutionary Movements in Latin America: El Salvador's FMLN and Peru's Shining Path*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1998).
- [15] Schutz and Slater, "Revolution and Political Change in the Third World," 34.
- [16] Thomas H. Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall Publishing, 1990), 96.
- [17] Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements*, 97.
- [18] [18] Greene, *Comparative Revolutionary Movements*, 134.
- [19] John M. Hart, *Revolutionary Mexico: The Coming and Process of the Mexican Revolution*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 36.
- [20] Morelos is located in Southern Mexico; its one and only industry is sugar implantation.
- [21] Leo Huberman, *Cuba: An Anatomy of Revolution* (N.Y.: Monthly Review Press, 1961)
- [22] Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2010: Promoting high-level sustainable growth to reduce unemployment in Africa*. 2011, 15.
- [23] Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2010*, 16.
- [24] Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2010*, 21.
- [25] Basel Saleh. "Tunisia: IMF "Economic Medicine" has resulted in Mass Poverty and Unemployment : Protests by suicide as a Symbol of Resistance," *Global Research* (2010), accessed: March 30, 2011, URL: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/PrintArticle.php?articleId=22587..>
- [26] Human Rights Watch, *Tunisia: Long-Term Solitary Confinement of Political Prisoners*, 16 (2004): 7.
- [27] Amnesty International, *Tunisia in Revolt: State Violence During Anti-Government Protests*, 2011.
- [28] Economic Research Center, *The Economics of The Egyptian Revolution*, (February 4, 2011), accessed March 28, 2011, URL: [http://www.csub.edu/kej/documents/weekly\\_updates/2011-02-14.pdf](http://www.csub.edu/kej/documents/weekly_updates/2011-02-14.pdf)
- [29] Arab Republic of Egypt, Ministry of Finance, *Egypt Economic Monitor 7*, (2010).
- [30] The World Bank, *Egypt Country Profile*, accessed March 30, 2011, URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/egypt-arab-republic>.
- [31] *Ibid.*

# Economic Crisis, Political Repression, and Geopolitics in the Middle East

Written by Milad Javdan

- [32] Economic Research Center, *Economics of the Egyptian Revolution*, 3.
- [33] Index Mundi, *Egypt Country Profile*, accessed March 30, 2011. URL: <http://www.indexmundi.com/g/g.aspx?c=eg&v=74>.
- [34] Economic Research Center, *Economics of the Egyptian Revolution*, 6.
- [35] The Washington Institute of Near East Policy, *Political Islam and Regime Survival in Egypt*, Policy Focus 51 (2006)
- [36] David S. Sorenson, "Dynamics of Political Dissent in Egypt." *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* 27 (2003): 207-228.
- [37] Sorenson, "Dynamics of Political Dissent in Egypt," 212.
- [38] Human Rights Watch, *Work on Him Until He Confesses: Impunity for Torture in Egypt*, 2011, 15.
- [39] Economic Commission for Africa, *Economic Report on Africa 2010*, 32.
- [40] Conflicting reports range from 15-30% unemployment rate in 2003.
- [41] African Development Bank Group, *African Fixed Income Guidebook*, May 2007.
- [42] The World Bank, *Libya Country Profile*, accessed March 30, 2011, URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/country/libya>,
- [43] Human Rights Watch, *Libya: Words or Deeds – The Urgent Need for Human Rights Reform* 18(2006): 1-87.
- [44] Human Rights Watch, *Libya: Words or Deeds*, 3.
- [45] The World Factbook, Country Profiles: *Libya and Tunisia*, accessed March 31, 2011, URL: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ly.html>.
- [46] Population Reference Bureau, Country Profiles: *Egypt, Libya and Tunisia*. URL: <http://www.prb.org/>. Retrieved: March 31<sup>st</sup>, 2011.