

WHITHER THE ARAB SPRING?

It is a hard time to be an optimist about the Arab Spring. What started with the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor frustrated by the injustice and ineptitude of his country's corrupt leaders and then mushroomed into massive public demonstrations across the Arab world now seems to have degenerated into violence, instability, and chaos. Syria has been ripped apart by civil war. Bahrain's government continues its crackdown on its Shiite majority. Al Qaeda's presence in Yemen appears to be growing, as are secessionist pressures in the south of the country. Libya still grapples with lawlessness two years after the end of its civil war. Tensions between Islamists and secularists in Tunisia reached a boiling point in 2013. And, of course, following nationwide antigovernment protests in Egypt, a military-controlled transitional government has replaced the country's first democratically elected one.

This book nonetheless presents an optimistic assessment of the long-term prospects for the democratization of Arab countries. Drawing on the recent experience of a broad range of countries elsewhere in the world that embarked on their transition to democracy during what is known as the "Third Wave" of democratization,¹ this book seeks to show that the trials and tribulations of the Arab Spring are neither entirely new nor unique. They are instead part and parcel of the struggles often faced by countries in transition to democracy. And from those countries' experiences, it seeks to illuminate a path forward for the countries of the Arab Spring.

The Puzzle

A recent *Time* magazine cover captured well the status of the Arab Spring nearly three years on. Published shortly after the June 30, 2013, mass demonstrations in Egypt against then-President Mohamed Morsi—which ended with the military removing him from office—it featured a split screen superimposed on a photo of the crowds in Tahrir Square. The caption “World’s Best Protesters” was printed on the left and “World’s Worst Democrats” was printed on the right—and the image of the crowd on the right was shaded blood red.

This is the puzzle presented today by Egypt as well as the other countries touched by the Arab Spring. The citizens of the Arab world have finally found their collective voice. Long trammled by years of autocratic rule, they now fill the region’s squares, roundabouts, and boulevards with their protests, braving tear gas, truncheons, and even torture to make themselves heard. Yet what began with such great promise—with the youth of the Arab world spontaneously protesting in the name of freedom, dignity, and opportunity—has yet to produce a functioning democracy. Instead, it has deteriorated in many parts of the Arab world into a complex and at times bloody struggle between youthful revolutionaries and stalwarts of the old regime, Islamists and secularists, Muslims and Christians, Sunnis and Shia. The euphoria that accompanied the early protests in Tunisia and Egypt—in those heady days when it looked as if Arab youth were set to tear the region from its history—has given way to deep-seated pessimism. Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria degenerated into violence and even civil war while Tunisia and Egypt have struggled to overcome the legacy of authoritarianism, to write new constitutions, and to keep their newly elected governments on the democratic path. Moreover, pessimism turned to consternation as the so-called liberals in Egypt and, for a time, Tunisia looked to the military to save them from elected Islamist governments. Some commentators have compared the events of the Arab Spring to those of 1848, when the youth of Europe also took to the streets to protest tyranny. Yet for all the tumult and upheaval, in the end little changed politically, at least for a generation.² Others have drawn darker parallels with the French, Russian, and Iranian revolutions, in which more violent and extreme forces outmaneuvered nascent democratic movements.³ The Arab region’s democratic activists have been remarkably successful in mobilizing citizens to take to the streets and in tearing down a number of the region’s most

despotic regimes, but they have been far less successful in translating that revolutionary energy into lasting political change.

The popular revolts of the Arab Spring have left not democracy but a political vacuum in their wake. All kinds of forces—political Islamists, ultranationalists and violent sectarians, secular democrats, elements of former regimes, and al Qaeda and other violent extremists—are now vigorously competing to fill that vacuum. The disorder has been so pervasive that many across the region and in the West have expressed the wish that the Arab Spring had never happened and have called for an end to the civil disobedience roiling the region. They have come to view free assembly itself as dangerous, too fraught with the risk of instability. Shortly before the June 30 demonstrations in Egypt, for example, the then-U.S. ambassador to Egypt delivered a now-famous speech discouraging students from protesting in the streets.⁴

The puzzle is this: how could such widespread public demonstrations of citizens' hunger for change have produced so little change so far? In Egypt, for instance, how could a protest movement that reputedly collected an unprecedented 22 million signatures from citizens expressing no confidence in their elected president—and that mobilized those millions to take to the streets—have then ceded control of the country's transition to the military? How could the Egyptian people stage three popular revolts in the span of less than three years—against long-time strongman Hosni Mubarak, the interim military government, and Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government—yet still end up well short of democracy? Throughout the region, the last three years have seen a remarkable outpouring of popular protest yet far fewer constructive steps to build successful new democracies.

This book attempts to explain that puzzle and propose a way forward by examining recent experiences with democratization in other regions of the world: in the former Eastern bloc; the Muslim-majority countries of Asia; Latin America; and Sub-Saharan Africa. The Arab world was not the first region of the world to embark on a transition to democracy but the last. Before the Arab Spring, some ninety countries across the globe had embarked on transitions to democracy since the mid-1970s.⁵ What the experiences of those regions suggest is that much of the pessimism about the Arab Spring is unwarranted. Democracy takes time to take root, even under the best of circumstances. How the events of the Arab Spring play out—whether they lead to a more stable, prosperous, and democratic Middle East or something more sinister and tragic—is a story that is still unfolding.

The Rise of the Citizen and the Collapse of the Old Order

While it is still too early to predict the fate of Arab democracy, it is clear that there is no returning to the status quo ante. As much as some may wish, there is no putting the genie back in the bottle. Arab citizens are demanding a say in their own governance and are no longer willing to tolerate authoritarianism. For more than half a century, the Arab Middle East was ruled largely by autocrats whose reign over time became increasingly heavy-handed, unjust, and corrupt. While the old status quo may have served the perceived short-term interests of the United States—because it provided a modicum of stability in the region, ensured the flow of cheap oil from the Gulf, and protected America’s most important ally in the region, Israel—it failed to meet even the most basic social welfare needs of the region’s citizens, who increasingly chafed at the limitations imposed on their personal freedom and economic opportunities.

Then, on December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit vendor, set himself on fire and the old order suddenly began to unravel. As he lay dying in a hospital room, Tunisians angrily massed in the streets in protest. By mid-January 2011, as the popular protests continued to grow, Tunisian strongman Ben Ali was forced to flee into exile. The aura of invincibility that had long surrounded the region’s dictators had suddenly been pierced, and the fear began to dissipate. Inspired by events in Tunisia, Egyptian activists who had long struggled against the Mubarak regime mobilized supporters to occupy Tahrir Square. The demonstrations soon spread to Alexandria, Giza, and Suez, then throughout Egypt. After more than two weeks of sometimes bloody demonstrations and counter-demonstrations in Egypt, Mubarak stepped down. The events in Egypt had ripple effects throughout the Arab world. Protests quickly spread to Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Morocco, Jordan, and Oman, then throughout much of the rest of the Arab world. Rulers struggled to get ahead of the protests by proposing reforms, doling out cash benefits to citizens, deploying force, or trying some combination of the three.

The Arab world has been forever changed by these events. The “hour of the citizen,” a term that the late Lord Ralf Dahrendorf used to refer to post-1989 Eastern Europe, has now arrived in the Arab Middle East.⁶ Ordinary Arabs have finally found their voice and in important respects are now driving events in the region. They are demanding the right to choose their own political leaders, partake in certain basic freedoms, participate in their own governance, and craft societies that respect the basic dignity of all citizens. Any effort by the United States to reinstate

the ancien régime would lead to greater upheaval and instability. Trying to repress this Arab civic awakening would not only be impracticable but also contrary to American values and interests. It is just such repression that has bred al Qaeda and other forms of extremism in the Arab world.

While the power of the citizen is indisputably on the rise, it is less clear what that will ultimately mean for the region's future. Countries in the region now appear to be following three different trajectories.⁷ In one set of countries, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, citizens have succeeded in sweeping away the old order and ostensibly have begun to make a still fragile transition toward democracy. In the second set, the old rulers have succeeded to date in staying ahead of or suppressing the demands of their people by revamping the old order in ways that allow them to preserve, at least for now, their hold on power. This group includes not only the Gulf monarchies, which benefit from their oil and gas wealth to buttress their rule, but also Morocco and Jordan, which lack that wealth but share the legitimacy accorded to hereditary monarchies. In the third group, state and society are locked in a violent stalemate, even civil war, over the future of their country. Syria now falls into this category, as Libya, Yemen, and Bahrain once did; others, like Jordan (and possibly Bahrain once again), could yet meet this fate if change does not come quickly enough to satisfy their citizens' demands. What is not yet known is how successful the transition toward democracy will be in the first set, how far the democratic impulse will spread beyond those four countries, and how long the others can stave off citizens' demands for greater participation, accountability, transparency, and effectiveness in government. Will the future of the region bring democracy, continued autocracy, or ongoing civil war? The region remains in a state of flux. The Arab Spring has forever transformed the region's politics, yet its ultimate impact remains unclear.

Lessons from Elsewhere

What recent history shows is that democratization tends to be a lengthy process. It is far easier to unseat an autocratic leader (although events in Syria are demonstrating once again that even that is not a simple task) than it is to construct a new democratic order: "You can tweet a revolution, but you can't tweet a transition" to democracy.⁸ Transitions rarely proceed in a smooth, straightforward manner; they almost always include sudden advances coupled with heartbreaking reversals. Often the reversals contribute in important ways to the political learning required

to build a democracy. At root, democratization is a political process. It involves a fundamental shift in power from those governing to those governed—power that is never ceded freely, without at least a political struggle. Political power in a democracy derives in large part from the ability to organize—in order to mobilize supporters at election time, to corral votes in the legislature, and to govern effectively.

In this political struggle, the legacies of the past loom large and shape the constellation of forces involved today. In the Arab Middle East, the dysfunctions of former regimes, not the introduction of democracy, are primarily responsible for the polarization and violence now being seen.⁹ The region's authoritarian leaders have inculcated throughout society a paternalistic pattern of behavior that influences human relations in general: from how a ruler relates to the ruled to how a parent relates to a child, a teacher to a student, and an employer to an employee. Moreover, they have instilled a xenophobic nationalism in the population that may take a generation to undo. They have strengthened and empowered the military and security services, generously funding and equipping these critical props to their rule to the point that these forces are now first among equals in many countries. At the same time, the region's autocrats pitted secularists against Islamists as a way of dividing the opposition to their rule. They generally clamped down tightly on the secular opposition, limiting its engagement in political life. They were unable to do the same as successfully with their Islamist foes because of the Islamists' tight connections to religion and religious institutions.

Consequently, three main camps now vie for power in the Arab Middle East: the security forces long associated with the ancien régime, the Islamists, and the secularists. The security forces inherited all of the fire-power, but they are hindered by the problem of legitimacy because of their links to the old order. The Islamists were best prepared to participate in the first truly competitive multiparty elections in the region because, thanks to their history of political opposition to secular autocrats, they are the most organized and disciplined of the groups competing and have the deepest roots within society. The secularists are far weaker organizationally because they were rarely allowed to participate in politics before and because they are divided ideologically among liberals, socialists, communists, nationalists, and the like. At the moment, they may appear outmanned, out-organized, and outmaneuvered, but in numerical terms they probably represent the largest proportion of the population in most countries.

This book argues, drawing on the experiences of countries elsewhere in the world that transitioned to democracy fairly recently, that over the long term successful democratization requires the emergence of a political constituency that supports democracy. What citizens tend to seek when they embark on a democratic path are not just elections, but democracy in a much richer sense. They seek not just *electoral democracy*, in which periodic multiparty elections are held for political office under free and fair conditions, but democracy in the broader sense of *liberal democracy*. In the words of Robert Dahl, the latter includes “classical liberal freedoms that are a part of the definition of public contestation and participation: opportunities to oppose the government, form political organizations, express oneself on political matters without fear of governmental reprisals, read and hear alternative points of view.” Those freedoms are what citizens want, along with the right to “vote by secret ballot in elections in which candidates of different parties compete for votes and after which the losing candidates peacefully yield their claim to office to the winners.”¹⁰ In a word, they desire a state that governs effectively and justly, according to the rule of law and with respect for individual rights and the will of the public.

Achieving those ends is often the work of not months or years but decades or more. Even the most established democracies, the United States being just one case in point, struggle continually to realize in full the “more perfect union” to which the U.S. constitution aspires. Building such a union requires the convergence of many factors. Among other things, it requires a well-crafted constitution that enumerates the rights of the citizen and divides power among different branches of government. It requires well-designed political institutions staffed by talented individuals. Effective political parties also are critical. Material support and incentives from the international community may be valuable. But this book argues that most of all, it requires public demand—the existence of an effective political constituency for democracy.¹¹ The best-designed and most well-intentioned political systems will fail to function as intended unless political leaders understand that there will be a price to pay if they violate the rules of the game—that the public stands ready to defend its hard-won freedoms. At the end of the day, democracy requires democrats.

To provide some historical perspective, in the ninety or so countries across the world that have embarked on a democratic transition since the mid-1970s, events rarely unfolded according to the highly idealized

visions of how such transitions should proceed. The early optimistic hopes of the revolutionaries in the streets often were dashed as political realities set in. Democrats, liberals in particular, often found themselves isolated as demagogues, populists, ultra-nationalists, and religious zealots capitalized on citizens' insecurities and prejudices to gain power. In scant few of the countries was there a well-organized and politically popular liberal democratic party prepared to move the country forward rapidly. In many there were neither strong constitutional traditions nor robust political institutions for new political leaders to build on. Debate often raged over who had the right to participate in the new democratic system and how and by whom constitutions were to be written. Founding elections rarely proceeded without incident, and unscrupulous candidates sought to exploit ethnic, religious, or class differences to win office. Contrary to expectations, in only very rare instances did the transitions proceed neatly from a political opening (usually the fall of an authoritarian political leader) to free and fair elections and the rotation in power of competing political parties that used their time in office to expand democratic freedoms and strengthen the rule of law. Most democratic transitions were far messier, full of democratic reversals and even breakdowns. Democracy in the fuller sense described by Dahl emerged, if at all, only after a long, arduous process involving intense political struggle over power and the nature of the future state.

If this history is any guide, the Arab Middle East is likely to experience a lengthy period of uncertainty as citizens and their leaders struggle toward a new balance between state and society. There is likely to be not one constitutional crisis—like Egypt's massive public demonstrations of June 30, 2013, or President Morsi's emergency decree of November 2012, which greatly expanded his powers—but many. Understanding the momentous events unfolding in the region requires looking beyond the political headlines of the moment and taking a longer-term view. The success or failure of democratization in the region is unlikely to be determined by the results of a single election, a clause that does or does not get written into a constitution, or one supreme court decision. Nor will the possibilities for democratic change be limited by what has or has not proved possible in the region before. The ongoing political changes in the region must be viewed in the context of the broader historical forces that are rearranging the relationship between citizen and state across the globe. Put simply, the Arab Spring needs to be put into comparative perspective. That is what this book attempts to do.

The Path Forward

What recent history teaches is that the popular protests convulsing the Middle East are not the problem but the beginning of a solution to the democratic deficit plaguing the region. More Tahrir Squares are needed, not fewer. That is, rather than trying to drive citizens from the public sphere, the United States and others should help democracy activists in the region broaden and deepen the constituency for change that the protesters in Tahrir represent and make it more politically efficacious. The youth in Tahrir represent an exciting new generation; their values differ from those of their parents, and they are more empowered than their parents to bring change to the Middle East. Rather than turn its back on them, the United States should seek to expand their ranks by encouraging more such value change and greater personal empowerment and by helping to make them more effective political actors.

In every corner of the Arab world, one can find democracy activists who are desperately looking for ways to push their country into the twenty-first century. They are trying to harness the power of crowds, new communication technologies, and the support of the international community to move their country toward democracy. Like Nelson Mandela, Lech Walesa, and Vaclav Havel before them, they are risking their lives to pursue a new vision for their country, one grounded in democratic principles. They organized the protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt as well as those in Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunisia, Benghazi's Court Square in Libya, Change Square in Yemen, and elsewhere. They merit U.S. support. At times they have been overshadowed by those who practice violence, who exploit sectarian differences for political gain, who dream of theocracy, or who hope to return the generals to power. But they remain unbroken and unshaken in their commitment to peaceful, democratic change. The United States should help them broaden their base of support, strengthen their links to the rest of society, and learn to engage more effectively in the political process. Ultimately, they can help generate the public demand from below that ensures that democracy prevails and nascent democratic institutions function as intended.

As chapter 2 discusses in detail, the changes sweeping the Arab world are only one manifestation of broader forces that are altering the nature of politics around the globe. Rising living standards, more education, enhanced mobility, and the freer flow of information are changing the expectations of citizens everywhere about the proper relationship

between the citizen and the state. As Zbigniew Brzezinski has observed, there is a “global political awakening” under way that is centered on issues of human dignity.¹² Democracy, once a political system practiced exclusively in a handful of Western (or Western-colonized) states, has become universally desired, to the point that a majority of citizens in almost every country in the world express a preference for it.¹³

But desiring democracy and realizing it are different things. While democracy as a norm has spread across the world relatively quickly, citizens are learning only more gradually how to put it into practice. They are discovering that achieving democracy requires more than just deposing a dictator, holding elections, and writing an effective constitution. Particularly at a time when new democratic institutions are just being formed, it requires citizens to be actively engaged in the political process, ensuring that the constitutional rules of the game remain inviolate. The key test of a democracy’s durability is how citizens respond in those “constitutional moments” when the very foundations of democracy are under challenge. When a political leader suspends parliament or gets caught flagrantly taking a bribe in return for political favors—when the democratic rules of the game are being flaunted—do citizens take action to defend the rules or passively condone the transgression? In such moments, the fate of a democracy hangs in the balance and only its citizens can ensure that it endures.

If history counts for anything, in time a number of countries within the Arab world, though not all, will succeed in making the transition to democracy. So far, Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen have embarked on that transition, albeit with substantial setbacks along the way. Others, like Jordan and Morocco, could yet do so, as could Syria and Iraq should they overcome the current polarization along sectarian lines.

How quickly and successfully any transition occurs depends in part on the regional security context in which domestic developments take place. Will the United States exercise leadership in stabilizing the Middle East, or will it leave the field to Iran and Saudi Arabia—the two major regional powers, besides Israel—to continue their proxy wars across the region? Will the sectarian polarization and political violence ignited by the Syrian civil war continue or be contained? Will the alarming military advances by al Qaeda offshoots throughout the region increase or be rolled back? Regardless, all of these countries will need time to develop the constitutional rules, the electoral processes, the democratic institutions, and, above all, the level of civic engagement that lead to consolidated and, it is hoped, liberal democracies. Over the long term, the prospects for success

look brighter for a country like Tunisia, which has a relatively homogenous population, a shared sense of nation, a relatively educated population, a history of openness to the rest of the world, and a connected citizenry, than, say, Yemen, which has few of those traits. But only time will tell—the history of democratization is full of surprises.

The Purpose and Structure of This Book

This book is written for the Arab democratic activists struggling to bring democracy to their own country and for those in the West who support them. In the hope of enriching the collective understanding of the events of the Arab Spring, it tells the story of democratization in other regions of the world during the so-called Third Wave. It does so in the conviction that we can learn from the experiences of other nations that have attempted to transform their political system into a democracy. Their culture, history, and socioeconomic conditions may differ, but broad common patterns can be discerned that help make the unfamiliar familiar. Many of the issues that Arab democrats are now grappling with are broadly similar to those that their counterparts in other regions of the world once faced: how to create effective transitional governments, how to overcome the polarization of society that undermines democracy, how to deal with nondemocratic actors, what the proper place of the military is in new democracies, and how to move from protest to politics. From the struggles of citizens to advance the cause of democracy in other countries, powerful lessons can be gleaned to assist those in the Arab world struggling to achieve the same end.

The book focuses in particular on the role that citizens play in consolidating democracy. The role of civil society in a democracy has often been celebrated, but how it plays a part in developing and strengthening democracy has not been well understood. As mentioned, the book makes the case that it is often pressure placed on government leaders by citizens and civic groups that ensures that nascent democratic institutions function as intended. If people are to be truly sovereign, they need to demonstrate to political leaders that it is they, the people, who wield ultimate power. Their chief weapon against the coercive apparatus of the modern state is their sheer numbers; when broad sections of a society rise up against the state, even the most authoritarian government must take heed. As was the case in the Third Wave countries, an extended tug-of-war between state and society is now under way in the Arab world over where power resides. It will take sustained effort on the part of the

population to wrest control of the “deep states” that their authoritarian leaders have forged over the course of the last half-century.¹⁴ It is the citizens of the Arab world and their newly found collective power that offer the greatest hope for the future of democracy in the region.

This book’s argument harks back to a very old one. The careful separation of powers—a division of executive, legislative, and judicial powers among competing bodies that creates “an invitation to struggle”—is often regarded as the genius of the American political system.¹⁵ But its founders understood equally well that liberty’s ultimate defense was an enlightened and engaged citizenry. James Madison, the visionary architect of the U.S. Constitution, wrote: “The advancement and diffusion of knowledge . . . is the only guardian of true liberty.”¹⁶ He noted further that “to suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea.”¹⁷ Similarly, Thomas Jefferson wrote confidently to a friend in 1789 about the decision to revise the Articles of Confederation and move toward a federal government: “Wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government; that whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied upon to set them to rights.”¹⁸

It was people power that set off the dramatic revolutions that upended the old order in the Middle East, and people power will be required to ensure that the dreams of those revolutions are eventually realized. The story of democracy’s advance across the globe is one of profound attitudinal changes and fierce political struggles for power. This book looks at that story, region by region, to see what it may have to say about the Arab Spring.

Chapter 2 provides an overview of the attitudinal changes that helped produce the Third Wave of democratization and that are now influencing political events in the Arab Middle East. The four chapters that follow chapter 2 tell the story of democratization efforts in other regions of the world. Chapter 3 focuses on the Eastern bloc—Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union—because in many respects Eastern Europe’s popular revolutions resemble the bottom-up political uprisings now convulsing the Arab world. Chapter 4 focuses on Muslim-majority countries in Asia, which bear some cultural and religious similarities to the Arab world and have much light to shed on the often debated issue of the relationship between Islam (and, more aptly, *political* Islam) and democracy. Chapter 5 looks at the democratization experience of Latin America, where often societal polarization has been high and militaries have played an important role in governance. Chapter 6 looks at that of Sub-Saharan

Africa, where, although politics has long been dominated by political strongmen, positive changes are afoot in a number of countries. These chapters examine how the Third Wave of democratization played out in each region and the consequences that it ultimately had for the region's politics. Each includes four country case studies—two of countries that were relatively successful and two that were less so—in order to ground the discussion in the concrete experiences of particular countries. Chapter 7 summarizes the key lessons that emerge from the democratization experiences of countries elsewhere for the countries of the Arab Spring. Chapter 8 looks at the key strategic challenges faced by democratic activists in most, if not all, transitions and tries to provide guidance, based on experiences in other regions, on how activists might address them. Chapter 9 concludes the book with a set of detailed policy recommendations on how the United States might best assist democratic activists struggling to bring democracy to the Arab Middle East.