

# Egypt: The Unfinished “Arab Spring”

Wednesday 6 January 2021, by [ETZBACH Harald](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2020).

**“Ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam” (the people want to overthrow the regime) was the central slogan of the political movement known as the “Arab Spring” [1] which, beginning in late 2010 in Tunisia, spread to Egypt and eventually to a whole string of countries in North Africa and West Asia. Besides these two countries, the major centres included Syria, Bahrain, Libya, and Yemen; with smaller waves of protest in many other countries such as Jordan, Morocco, and Oman. In Tunisia, it was the self-immolation of the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi that triggered the protests against the government. Bouazizi committed his act of desperation following a series of arbitrary actions by the police. The demonstrations that took place throughout the country over the next few weeks quickly expanded into a genuine insurgency, which resulted in the first regime in the region being overthrown relatively quickly: in mid-January 2011, the autocratic reign of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali came to an end when he fled the country for Saudi Arabia.**

The protests in Egypt began on 25 January, and from early February were accompanied by strikes in which hundreds of thousands of workers took part. This time it took only two weeks to overthrow the regime: on 11 February 2011, President Husni Mubarak resigned, and a military council took over the government.

In Bahrain, the attempts to overthrow the regime were unsuccessful. The revolutionary process was stifled through foreign interference when Saudi troops invaded the country in mid-March and, shortly thereafter, together with the Bahraini army, used brutal force to quell opposition demonstrators.

Yemen and Libya managed to overthrow their respective rulers, but the insurgencies eventually led to civil wars, in which elements from the old regimes joined forces with opportunist groups from the insurgency movement to form shifting alliances. The two conflicts, which continue to this day, have also sparked significant international interventions.

The greatest tragedy of the “Arab Spring” occurred in Syria. Inspired by the events in Tunisia and Egypt, the people hoped to at least be able to persuade the Assad regime—which by then had already been in power for over 40 years—to usher in political and social reforms. In fact, the movement did not initially question the legitimacy of the system itself. The local trigger for the protests was the arrest of children in the southern Syrian city of Daraa. After tentative beginnings, by the summer of 2011 there were large demonstrations in cities like Homs and Hama. The regime reacted with ruthless severity and deployed the military against the demonstrators, with several hundred people killed in the first months of the protest movement.

## **Arrested Development and the (Neo-)Patrimonial State**

The revolutionary movements in West Asia and North Africa from 2010 onwards were the expression of a deep crisis and a blockage in political and economic development. [2] Young people were particularly affected, and they were also the ones who powered the movement and shaped the image

of the many protests and demonstrations. Women also played a prominent role, and continue to do so.

North Africa and West Asia have some of the highest rates of youth unemployment in the world. Therefore, it is probably no coincidence that the movements of the “Arab Spring” started in Tunisia. Even in comparison with its neighbours, the unemployment rate in Tunisia among 15–29-year-olds is extremely high (27.5 percent in 2010 and 40 percent in 2011). [3] This despite the fact that young Tunisians are well-educated, many with university degrees.

New information technologies and social media platforms, which were widely used by the younger generation for mobilization, also played an important role, allowing videos of demonstrations and other news to spread like wildfire throughout the region.

The inability of the economies of the Arab states to create sufficient job opportunities for a growing proportion of the younger population is a result of the low growth and investment rates in recent times, but particularly since the mid-1980s: a consequence of the decline and subsequent stagnation of the price of oil on the global market.

The oil boom of the 1970s had guaranteed high growth rates. Even the countries of the region that were not oil producers benefited from this: both directly, through intergovernmental financial transfers, or indirectly, through labour migration. However, governments in the region failed to diversify their economies. Oil revenues were mainly channelled into the service sector or into highly speculative areas such as real estate.

This development was exacerbated by the neoliberal structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s. The neoliberal dogma of privatizing state-owned industries, cutting social benefits, and privileging private enterprises and free trade had particularly fatal consequences in the countries of North Africa and West Asia. There is no clear distinction between “public” and “private”, and corruption and nepotism have often led to privatized businesses being taken over by people with close political and/or family ties to the ruling political elites. [4]

The main cause for this is a specific form of statehood which, following Max Weber’s typology of domination, can be described as patrimonial or neopatrimonial. A patrimonial state is in a sense “owned” by the ruling family. There is no separation between the state apparatus and the ruling family, and the armed forces function as a “private army”. The monarchies of the region belong to this category, but so do some nominal republics such as Iraq under Saddam Hussein, as well as Libya and Syria. [5]

By contrast, neopatrimonial states are characterized by a certain autonomy of state institutions. Examples are Algeria, Egypt, or Sudan. In these three countries, the army is also the central agent of power, which accounts for the fact that the respective presidents could be overthrown relatively easily and replaced by another person, since the army guarantees the continuity of the existing system. In completely patrimonial states this is not possible, since the entire state is directly compromised when the legitimacy of the “ruler” (whether king, emir, or president) is called into question. In recent years, Syrian activists in particular have had to experience what such a state is capable of when its existence is threatened.

### **The Arab Thermidor**

Around 2013, the revolutionary process petered out, and a wave of reactionary restoration swept across the region.

The forces that had initiated the protest movements—young people, workers, intellectuals—were

politically and organizationally unable to take a leading role in the revolutionary process. Other forces with their own objectives joined the movement and eventually took the reins, especially organizations with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood. This Islamist organization founded in Egypt at the end of the 1920s has branches in many Arab countries, where it has often stood in opposition to the ruling regimes. This development led to an increasing marginalization of the progressive forces.

In Egypt, the political arena was increasingly dominated by a conflict between representatives of the old regime on the one hand and supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood on the other. This situation intensified when Mohamed Morsi of the Freedom and Justice Party (founded by the Muslim Brotherhood) was elected president in June 2012. Morsi's increasingly authoritarian tendencies, together with the desolate economic situation, led to new protests and demonstrations. On 3 July 2013, there was a military coup led by the Commander-in-Chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who was elected president barely a year later, and has since established a regime that far surpasses its predecessors in terms of brutality and repression. As far as the economy goes, the el-Sisi government has consistently implemented the demands of the International Monetary Fund, which has led to the further impoverishment of large sectors of the population. [6]

The Syrian regime reacted with ruthless severity from the outset, using the army and its notorious secret services against peaceful demonstrators. In response, civilians and deserted soldiers formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which initially succeeded in driving the regime's army out of parts of the country, including Aleppo, Syria's second-largest city. However, in the long run, the lack of financial and military support and the absence of a unified military and political leadership weakened the FSA. In many places, they were pushed out by Islamic militias financed by Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.

On the other side of the conflict, the Assad regime began receiving support from Lebanon's Hezbollah in 2013, and then also directly from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. At the same time, it waged a merciless war against the civilian population, which involved the use of barrel bombs and chemical weapons. This scorched earth policy has been continued since 2015, when Russia also entered the war to support the regime. Russian fighter bombers have since targeted not only opposition militias but also schools and hospitals. An exceptional situation arose in the north-east of the country, where the Kurdish-dominated administration succeeded in establishing a kind of autonomous region by implementing a strategy of shifting alliances. Today, some 13 million Syrians are refugees, half of whom are internally displaced persons. The death toll is estimated at between 400,000 and 600,000.

In Tunisia, there was indeed a formal political democratization after the events of 2010 and 2011. The Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail (UGTT) played an important role in this process. After the post-revolutionary Constituent Assembly completed its work in December 2014, a series of more or less short-lived governments followed in quick succession, made up of Islamists, representatives of the old regime, and technocrats. Parts of the opposition, including the UGTT, were co-opted. The IMF imposed a strict austerity programme on Tunisia. In 2019, more than 36 percent of young Tunisians were unemployed. [7] It almost seems as if, ten years on, the country is back where it started in 2010.

## **The Second Wave: Revolutionary Movements since 2018**

Revolutionary processes continue as long as the underlying contradictions persist. It is therefore hardly surprising that a second wave of revolutionary uprisings began in December 2018 with the Sudanese uprising in West Asia and North Africa. In June of the same year, the Jordanian government had already resigned following protests against the austerity measures it had imposed: a move that received little international attention. This was followed by the Algerian uprising in

February 2019 and massive social and political protests in Iraq and Lebanon since October 2019. The effects of these uprisings were felt in many countries throughout the region. In Morocco, for example, the Front Social Marocain (FSM), an alliance of left-wing parties and trade unions, organized several large demonstrations in February 2020 calling for the release of political prisoners and social improvements. [8] Even in Egypt, despite massive repression, in autumn 2019 there were protests in various cities with several thousand participants.

However, the second wave is different from the first. One of the most striking differences is that this time around, Islamist movements are playing virtually no role in the protest movements. This is simply because Islamists throughout the region were part of the regimes the movements were attacking, or cooperated closely with them. For instance, the regime of Omar al-Bashir in Sudan was a mixture of military dictatorship and Islamist rule. In Algeria, the party of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix, had long supported the government of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in a “presidential bloc”. And in Iraq and Lebanon, Islamist forces—here of the Shi’ite variety—were essential components of the respective governments.

The demands and themes of these new waves of protest by revolutionary movements, however, do not differ significantly from those of 2010 and 2011. They are still fighting for democracy and social justice. However, the protagonists of the movement have also learnt from past mistakes. Issues related to the (self-)organization of the movements continue to play a central role.

In this respect, the situation in Sudan is of great importance. In contrast to other Arab countries (except for Tunisia with the UGTT), the movement in Sudan has a leading force in the form of the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA). However, the SPA is not a political party but a broad network that existed underground for several years and developed into an association of trade unions and professional organizations in all key sectors following the December 2018 uprising. At present, the country is governed by a transitional council, in which figures from the insurgency are represented alongside the military command: a classic situation of dual rule, in which one side will prevail over the other in the long run.

### **Arab Revolutions in the Pandemic**

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 initially brought new mass mobilizations in the region to a halt, with demonstrations and gatherings in public places no longer possible. The autocratic regimes often took advantage of this to curb the movements and further intensify repression and authoritarian control. In April, for example, the Algerian government passed a law prohibiting the dissemination of “fake news”. As a result, in recent months opposition activists have repeatedly been sentenced to lengthy prison terms for their posts on social media. In Egypt, one of the first reactions of the el-Sisi regime was the amendment of the state of emergency law, which came into force on 22 April. The amendment essentially expands the already considerable powers of the military to prosecute civilians. It also gives the president direct personal command over the security forces and the military, bypassing the existing command structure.

The Assad regime in Syria is also trying to exploit the situation for its own ends by preventing the delivery of medical and other aid supplies to those regions that are not under its direct control, while also controlling the flow of international aid to government-held areas.

The economic impact of the pandemic in the region will be massive: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that the gross national product in West Asian countries will shrink by 4.7 percent in 2020. [9] In some countries, such as Iraq or Lebanon, the decline will be even more significant. [10] According to World Bank forecasts, foreign remittances, which play an important role in many countries in supporting the national economy, will decline by as much as 20 percent as

a result of the international economic crisis. Just how unresolved the region's fundamental socio-economic problems remain (and the extent to which the pandemic has actually exacerbated them) is shown by the fact that 15 percent of people aged 18-24 living in the region are actively trying to emigrate, and another 27 percent have at least considered doing so at some point. [11] The focus on individual "solutions" can—especially if it is accompanied by a feeling of political disappointment—lead to the weakening of movements. At the same time, however, there is a great deal of support for protest movements among the younger generation, many of whom are convinced that the protests will start up again in the near future. It can therefore be assumed that the pandemic will only lead to a suspension of the movement, and not its ultimate end.

### **The "Longue Durée" of the Arab Revolutions**

The future of the region remains uncertain. New regional and international constellations have emerged whose impacts cannot yet be assessed, and there is more cause for concern than euphoria. Much will depend on whether the revolutionary and emancipatory forces succeed in finding lasting and democratic organizational forms. For the time being, one thing can be said with certainty: the process that began in 2010 and 2011 is not over. The social contradictions that were brought to light by the so-called "Arab Spring" persist and will continue to lead to unrest, revolts, and revolutionary uprisings in the region. Even if the movement manages to topple one autocratic regime or the other, it will not be enough. The political revolution will always remain incomplete without a social revolution.

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### **Footnotes**

[1] Three remarks on terminology: 1) The use of the catchy phrase "Arab Spring" is not intended to suggest that the movements that began in West Asia and North Africa in 2010-2011 were a short-lived phenomenon. Rather, this text should make clear that they are the culmination of a long-term process. 2) The focus of the text is on the Arab countries in the region. It is clear that there are also non-Arab states and communities in West Asia and North Africa. Moreover, "Arab" is not meant in an ethnicizing sense, but in the sense of "Arabic-speaking". 3) The term "revolution" is used in this text because it is also used by the actors themselves. Whether the developments of 2010-11 and the following years indeed constituted revolutions remains a matter of debate.

[2] See Gilbert Achcar, *Le peuple veut. Une exploration radicale du soulèvement arabe*, Paris, Sindbad, Actes Sud, 2013, p. 23-62 and 63-114.

[3] International Labour Office (ILO): “Youth Unemployment and Migration—Country Brief: Tunisia”.

[[https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_emp/---ed\\_emp\\_msu/documents/publication/wcms\\_219632.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---ed_emp_msu/documents/publication/wcms_219632.pdf)].

[4] A particularly striking example of this is the cousin of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Rami Makhlouf, who controlled up to 60 percent of the Syrian economy through a wide-ranging network of assets before the war. See Lina Saigol, “Assad cousin accused of favouring family”, in: *Financial Times*, 21 April 2011

[<https://www.ft.com/content/e29a73f8-6b78-11e0-a53e-00144feab49a>].

[5] On the formation of the patrimonial state in the case of Syria, see Joseph Daher, “Syria after the Uprisings: The Political Economy of State Resilience”, London, 2019, pp. 1-37.

[6] See Amr Khafagy, “Celebrating poverty: the IMF in Egypt”, in: *Open Democracy*, 15 November 2019 [<https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/oureconomy/celebrating-poverty-imf-egypt/>].

[7] Tunisia: Youth unemployment rate from 1999 to 2019

[<https://www.statista.com/statistics/813115/youth-unemployment-rate-in-tunisia/>].

[8] Jules Crétois, “Maroc: le ‘Front social’, c’est quoi?”, in: *Jeune Afrique*, 26 February 2020

[<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/901319/politique/maroc-le-front-social-cest-quoi/>].

[9] International Monetary Fund, “World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020: A Crisis Like No Other, An Uncertain Recovery”

[<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2020/06/24/WEOUpdateJune2020>]; the study compiles the figures for West and Central Asia.

[10] Joelle M. Abi-Rached and Ishac Diwan, “The Socioeconomic Impact of COVID-19 on Lebanon: A Crisis Within Crises, Juni 2020”

[<https://www.euromesco.net/publication/the-socioeconomic-impact-of-covid-19-on-lebanon-a-crisis-within-crisis/>]; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), “Impact of Covid-19 on the Iraqi Economy”, 6 October 2020

[<https://www.iq.undp.org/content/iraq/en/home/library/Stabilization/impact-of-covid-19-on-the-iraqi-economy.html>].

[11] “Young Arabs look to emigrate as pandemic wrecks economies”, in: *Financial Times*, 6 October 2020 [<https://www.ft.com/content/349a60db-6b12-4210-a2f1-019b3e38c280>].