THE ARAB SPRING: A STARTING POINT
Bertrand Badie

S.E.R. | « Études »

2011/7 Volume 415 | pages 7 - 18
ISSN 0014-1941

This document is the English version of:


Translated from the French by Cadenza Academic Translations

Available online at:

https://www.cairn-int.info/article-E_ETU_4151_0007--the-arab-spring-a-starting-point.htm

How to cite this article:


Electronic distribution by Cairn on behalf of S.E.R.
© S.E.R.. All rights reserved for all countries.
Reproducing this article (including by photocopying) is only authorized in accordance with the general terms and conditions of use for the website, or with the general terms and conditions of the license held by your institution, where applicable. Any other reproduction, in full or in part, or storage in a database, in any form and by any means whatsoever is strictly prohibited without the prior written consent of the publisher, except where permitted under French law.
The Arab spring has animated societies that have seemed to be inert for a long time. However, even if these societies seem to have followed a common path over the last few months, it is still worth insisting on their extreme variety. There is no typical picture of the political regime in the Arab world before these important events. Without creating a typology, as that would be risky, it is still possible to distinguish schematically three types of regimes. The first is composed of traditional regimes, which rest on a legitimacy that, traditionally, is generally monarchic and often associated directly with religious references to the exercise of power – Islamic references, even Islamist ones do not belong merely to the realm of protestation. This covers most of the states of the Arab peninsula and Jordan.

A second category consists of regimes that are conservative but also republican, which often have military origins, as in the case of Tunisia or Egypt. In Egypt, the army occupied the seats of power, and the head of state, Hosni Moubarak, like his predecessors, was of this ilk. The regime may have become slightly “demilitarized” in appearance, but the army is never very far away. In Tunisia, Ben Ali, even though he did not come from the army but from the police, still formed his regime along military lines.

The third variant covers regimes previously categorized as “revolutionary.” These are constituted on a legitimacy that is neither traditional nor conservative, but which contest the preceding sociopolitical or international order, or both of these at the same time.
These three types of regimes have a common denominator: they belong to the social science category of the “modernizing autocracy,” a concept that was once prevalent. Whether traditional or revolutionary, monarchic or republican, these regimes were autocratic, non-participatory, and repressive, and yet they presented themselves to the world with the reassuring label of modernizers.

The idea of a modernizing autocracy was born out of the context of the developmentalism of the 1960s and 1970s. In that era, we were assured that in order to construct societies according to the norms of international modernity, it was necessary to pass through a period of authoritarianism. It was thought necessary to “suffer” for a generation or two, or even longer, in order to gain access to the paradise of democracy.

With the events of September 11, a new legitimation appears, which is linked to the need for security. Western powers distinguished regimes that could guarantee regional and international security and those that could only offer it imperfectly or not at all. The concept of “rogue states,” which emerged first during the Clinton presidency, is related to these two latter categories. These include states such as Syria, Libya, and even Iraq during the time of Saddam Hussein. This notion, however, remained uncertain and unstable. In contrast to the specific case of Iraq, Syria and Libya gained their “security” credentials in part because Libya had approached the Western camp and given security guarantees, most notably in the area of migration control but also regarding control of terrorism. As for Syria, Western powers, including the United States under George Bush, eventually admitted that it had been relatively cooperative in relation to the eradication of terrorism after September 11.

Though very different, these regimes are linked by their authoritarianism or a resistance to change which had been judged to be acceptable de facto in the name of this double dogma: these countries need to develop and they need to contribute to regional and international security. The most contestatory among them will do this in their own fashion. Similarly, the Syrian Baath regime was put forward as a guarantee of regional stability, and it was readily recalled that Syria had not fired any shots in the direction of Israel since 1973. Thus, these regimes, even the most deviant ones, were convenient for almost everyone.
The Role of Islam

While cultural differences between these regimes and those from other continents do exist, they are not particularly significant. Paradoxically, Islam has certainly been frequently used both to justify authoritarianism and to legitimate contestation. However, to claim that Islam is the cause of either authoritarianism or contestation is obviously excessive. This culture served as a reservoir of symbols that facilitated the justification of authoritarian practices or favored recourse to forms of contestation. Beyond this instrumental and rather cynical political use of Islam, it can be admitted now that contrary to what assumptions concerning the clash of civilizations had led us to believe, Islam has not cultivated any particularly authoritarian form. Just as Christianity can be put to democratic or authoritarian use, the same is true of Islam.

On the other hand, it is true that religious symbols are more prevalent in the Muslim world, and that political and ideological references are scarce and weak. The ways that religion has been used in the region owes more to the poverty of contemporary ideology in the Arab world than the nature of the Muslim religion.

Social Time and Political Time

This rapport between the social and the political is the real problem. I am loathe to use the concept of civil society to describe social spaces in the Arab world, because we have known for a long time, most particularly through the work of Hannah Arendt, that the characteristic of authoritarianism is to break social bonds. The poverty of civil society in the Arab world arose and still arises from the authoritarian nature of the exercise of power. Especially since this authoritarianism in its different forms has always managed to organize itself via a mode of patronage that favors vertical relationships over horizontal ones.

If Arab revolutions are to become intelligible, we have to admit that they belong more to social time than political time. The key to this mobilization is to be found in the effort to restore links within fragmented societies, which explains the success of the Internet and modern forms of communication. It also explains why the organization of these movements has only marginally been political.
It would be false to claim that these movements were disorganized. They were organized, but more socially than politically. They reflected a desire to reconstruct solidarities before appearing as forms of mobilization geared to promoting a political party or leaders. The error made by Western observers has been to believe that the weakness of the Arab world’s civil societies condemned social spaces to stagnation. The opposite effect was produced. In a poorly constructed civil society, the dynamic of reconstituting social links created an unprecedented mobilization and movement.

The powers that be were surprised. No one believed in the virtues of a social dynamic in the political arena. People were not looking at societies, but at politics and the extreme form of politics represented by dissent. The rise of social movements was not noticed since no one cared to look for them.

In order to understand this phenomenon, we need to look at the founding events of this social sequence: economic instability, the revolt against under-employment, and even starvation in some areas. This sequence is very apparent in Syria where such movements emerged when the population was in a very precarious economic and social situation. However, these factors are probably not what is most essential.

The key was a revolt against humiliation and a call to dignity. In Tunisia, the trigger gesture was the suicide of Mohammad Bouazizi, who set himself on fire not because he was unemployed but because he had been slapped by a policewoman. This contempt had become a driving force of government action, a weapon of domination. The slogan that spread at very high speed, in both Tunisia and Tahrir Square in Cairo, was one of dignity, pride, and the regaining of honor. This reveals that older community values had been recovered, values that form the basis of the classical philosophy of the Arab world, which have already attracted our attention. In these values, there are elements that relate to an older Mediterranean culture, a culture of honor. The word that has emerged from this mobilization is dignity (karama in Arabic), and the will to reconstruct it when lost.

It is for this reason that it was so difficult at first to construct a political program out of this social movement. Dignity goes beyond party-political action or programmatic positive affirmation. It is an essential human value. Not only are these revolutions distinguished by being the first post-Leninist revolutions of modernity – without a
party, a leader, or organization – but they are also the great humanist revolutions of our times, centered on human beings and dignity, human dignity. For this reason, paradoxically, leaders both near and far could not understand, because they had lost the habit of including humanist values at the center of their concerns.

**Dissidence and Collective Action**

Can one speak of dissidence? There is a long history of small groups of dissidents in the countries at the center of the storm in the Arab world today. There was dissidence in Tunisia (the Tunisian journalist Ben Brick, played a key role), and dissidence in Egypt with the *Kifaya* movement. These were not social movements at that time. The nature of contestation changed in the passage from an individual action, which characterizes dissident action, to collective action. The possibility that dissidence might divert a social movement was under-estimated both by observers and by those directly involved.

In 1989, something similar was already in evidence. In Eastern and Central Europe there had already been an evolution from dissidence to social movements. The major difference is that in 1989, this passage seemed to be appropriate because the international context favored it. Europe was undergoing significant change, and bipolarity was disappearing so rapidly that a slide from dissidence to social movements seemed inevitable. Whereas, in the Arab world, the sudden change occurred unprompted. No one urged the people in the streets of Tunis or Cairo to mobilize. This is probably why these events were such a surprise and why they continue to surprise.

The existing regimes did not believe it, particularly given the way that authoritarian regimes believe they are well liked. The reason for this disbelief is simple. In authoritarian regimes, particularly ones that are robust, people can only maintain their standing by flattering the prince and assuring him that his people love him. To act otherwise is to risk attracting the dictator’s thunder, and to find oneself plunged into dissidence. The most implacable dictators are reassured because someone continually tells them that all is well. Neither Ben Ali, nor Moubarak, nor even Bashar El Assad could imagine that such a movement could occur. This lack of preparation explains why the vulnerability of regimes was significantly increased.
The major Western powers had not seen it coming either. They were satisfied with the status quo. Western rhetoric presented these regimes, and most notably conservative regimes, as guarantors of stability. Yet they made a serious error, for in reality these regimes were not stable, but were simply maintaining the status quo. Thus, this inertia produced two incendiary effects: an inability to change and an inability to participate. The same characteristics can be found at regional level: the Moubarak regime did not protect the peace in the Near East, as has been sometimes said. Rather, it protected a status quo, which was in itself a generator of violence. This incorrect analysis confirmed Western powers’ thinking that they should not encourage change in this region of the world, therefore, when the first signs of such a change appeared, their first reaction was to call for containment. This brings to mind the unfortunate phrase used by the French Foreign Minister who indicated at this point that Western powers wished that the fire would be extinguished as quickly as possible, and even proposed aiding its repression.

The Arab Specificity of this Movement

These movements espouse the contours of the Arab world in an exceptionally clear manner. Arabism was disposed of too soon. This must be distinguished from pan-Arabism, which, in contrast, is probably less well developed as an ideology and hardly better developed as a governmental project. People were content to say that the Arab world was divided, that its union was a sham. However, it became reconciled in contestation: no country in the Arab world has been shielded from these storms and no country outside of the Arab world has really been touched. They have produced light tremors in Iran, and a few repercussions in China, but it has all been very marginal. There have been no effects in the nearest part of Africa, in the Caucasus, or in Central Asia.

The explanation can be found by examining the processes of identification that are very strong within the Arab world. What was possible in one country in the Arab world was possible in others, as Obama’s celebrated formula, “Yes we can,” reflects. If it were possible in Tunisia, why would it not be possible in Egypt, Yemen, or elsewhere?
Beyond this feeling of shared possibility, there is a communality of destiny in which the same values are shared by a group of peoples. “I, a Yemeni, have every reason to identify with my Tunisian brother and my Egyptian brother.” Issues of identification and solidarity find their full meaning here.

This identification is probably not in effect outside of the Arab world, which leads to a second reflection. In these revolutionary movements, the people have risen up against a particular fate that kept the Arab world relegated to the state as an instrument of security. The Arab world holds a special position in contemporary geo-strategy: it is not there to be served, but to serve others. It is thought of primarily as supporting the security of Israel and that of the West, most notably by containing migratory flows. The good of the Arab people is rarely considered, and instead, the question becomes how it might contribute to the security of others. This humiliation has probably played an important role. This united refusal within the Arab world to be considered as an instrument of the well-being of others played a fundamental role in the mobilization for honor and dignity.

A third reflection pertains to the models of development in other societies, be they African, Iranian, or Central Asian: these societies are completely different from one another. Africa has to confront a differently constructed authoritarianism, which does not really resemble that of the Arab world, and which references different modes of contestation. The political grammar is not the same when analyzing authoritarian practices in Chad, Gabon, or Burkina Faso where Idriss Déby, Ali Bongo, or Blaise Campaoré were elected or re-elected without opposition and in questionable circumstances. The history is different. It is a lesson in humility for political scientists. It cautions again any generalizations because the contexts are not the same.

The Social Bond

These revolutions represent a victory for the social bond. They mark a revenge on societies founded on politics. To speak of citizenship, it is necessary to adopt another register. One would have to admit that allegiance to state outweighs any other form of social, cultural, or religious allegiance. Nothing allows it to be established. More than affirming an allegiance, these movements express a
strong desire for participation. I also prefer to employ the concept of participatory culture rather than democratic culture or citizen culture. There is an evident desire to participate in political choices: it is harder to find a precise institutional translation for this, although observers, particularly Western observers, are trying hastily to form one.

Does the reinforcement of social bonds occur to the detriment of other bonds? Does it eclipse the tribal bond? Probably not. Its continuity is confirmed by events in Libya, Yemen, and even Tunisia. It is possible to speak about a regression of religious networks? Here, there is also a need to be cautious. There is no evidence that the religious bond has broken. Nothing suggests that this vein that links religion to the social and political spheres has disappeared. The great difficulty with this subject is that this vein takes very different forms according to the context and situation. As long as politics is not responsive enough, as long as the political expression of these protests does not come to be institutionalized in new forms of political parties, religion will be seen to regenerate at the political level. For now let us be wary of making any conclusions of this nature.

The Internet is one of the key factors in this movement. It is far reaching and operates across different registers, most notably in its promotion of the reconstitution of social links. It constructs links that are much more difficult to break than traditional social links. Authoritarian regimes can break syndicates, associations, or families, even the strongest among them. Breaking virtual communication is much more difficult.

In addition, the Internet functions like a substitute for political parties. There is no longer any need for political organization. That can simply be derived from communication. This new technique represents if not the death, at least the agony of Lenin’s “What to do?” The function of organization disappears to the degree in which one click can bring together individuals and orchestrate a mobilization.

**Political Reconstruction**

There is a lack of experience with regards to articulating social and political time. These revolutions belonged to social time, whereas organizing a government means passing over to a political
temporality. How can one start with social movements without experience, slogans, or political orientation, and then give birth to forms of government or coherent programs? No one knows. We are immediately confronted with a lack of political personnel, organization, and ideology. We have no historical precedent for this. Social time has played a comparable role since the French Revolution: social movements were also formed in a somewhat spontaneous manner then. However they soon led to a double political recuperation, firstly by general states, which gave birth to new political personnel who quickly occupied ground, but also to currents of thought derived from the Enlightenment.

In the Arab world there was none of this. The risk remains that too-hasty elections in Tunisia and Egypt might bring about the return of political people who were chased from power, as they are the only ones who are organized, who have networks and the financial means to undertake an electoral campaign successfully. This does not exclude the possibility that as soon as social movements enter a political temporality, they will be consumed by it, absorbed by the traditional forms of political action. Political scientists have to admit something that is often difficult to understand: elections are not always the ideal forms of immediate emancipation. An election that is too precocious can reinforce a past order, however much the population does not wish for it.

The two founding acts of democracy, in the widest sense of the term, and not only as applied to Western democracy, are the constitution of a social contract and the birth of a public space that allows for real debate. In the majority of the Arab world, neither one exists in a sufficiently developed state. There is no real social contract, because this world is often made up of segmented and fragmented groups. Thus, no civil society has been constituted and there are no long-standing social ties. The people must establish itself, as Rousseau said. Are we sure that these peoples will voluntarily establish a united political community?

On the other hand, there is a need for public debate to occur, and while its beginnings can be seen, it is not yet fully in evidence. Tahrir Square in Cairo was an exceptional and validating place. However, we are far from finding the beginnings of real, conscious choices between different options in this turbulence. Especially at a time in which we Westerners ourselves are finding public debate withering.
The social contract, which transcends cultures, contains a second concept, that of accepting coexistence, and admitting a shared form of government. This will to coexist has yet to be verified. A country as democratically advanced as Lebanon has shown that even the Lebanese themselves have not been able to decide whether or not they want to live together. This question has been conjured up by colonization as well as the blunders of decolonization. France’s responsibility is enormous in this case. It constituted Lebanon on the basis of advantages distributed to one and all rather than on the conviction that future Lebanese would share a real will towards coexistence. The same question can be asked about Iraq, with the Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. It is raised in Egypt among Copts and Muslims, and in Libya, between the provinces of Cyrenaica and Tripolitania.

Even if people agree to live together, they have to consider the type of city they want to construct. Numerous discourses on political Islam have masked the real question concerning the vision that will lead to the building of the city and the culture from which it is derived. It is a question of Arabic culture, Muslim culture, national culture, or the common culture particular to the segments making up this world? All hope rests on the ability to really discuss this one day.

Let us take the case of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. They are evolving. While their discourse resembles that of the Turkish AKP [Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi/Justice and Development Party], we have made significant progress in defining the contours of this new city. If, on the other hand, the discourse remains tribunial and contestatory, foreshadowing a coming moment of intolerance, the invention of the new city will be blocked. If now, when faced with the Muslim Brotherhood or Islamist movements, there is a discourse of stigmatization and exclusion, there is a risk that we may remain deadlocked for twenty years or more...

What has saved the West is that it has always forged utopias. They have often been the product of naivety, but they have always served to advance debate. The West has constructed its democracy on visions of its own choosing. The great problem in the Arab world is a lack of utopia, a lack of imagination. The Arab world often rules in the worst ways, through a return to the golden age, a regressive utopia. Will these revolutions usher in a moment of utopic production in the Arab world?
Political Program

While dignity may not be a political program, it is a structuring value. Dignity puts human beings back at the center of politics, in order to produce recognition, whereas authoritarianism nourishes itself on the lack of recognition. Alterity is the basis for the construction of the city. When one starts to think about the other and the relationship with the other, the construction of the city can begin. Perhaps this realization is a message of hope…

The demand for dignity may find a quick enough response, in restoring the Arab world to international life. From this point of view, foreign policy may be a springboard for change and the construction of a post-revolutionary order, as it is easier to reform in the short term.

Consequently, our responsibility is considerable. Either we know how to accommodate these movements and echo them, as the president of the United States has tried to do with unequal success, or we do not. In that latter moment, all is lost for them, for us, and for globalization.

If one looks now at the case of Libya, it is possible to see that it is part of a third temporality. After social time and political times comes international time. It was at this moment that the international community had to declare its position actively, and not in a reactive or passive manner. It was called upon to act according to the famous principle of responsibility, in order to protect a population threatened by very strong repression. The consensus around this idea was built rapidly, but it only held for 24 hours – 24 hours during which the Arab League, the UN Security Council, and its five permanent members were in agreement about establishing an aerial exclusion zone, which would prevent a bloody dictator from shedding his people’s blood. However, at the end of 24 hours the consensus broke: the noble cause was transformed, unconsciously at first and then more consciously, into a will to oust the dictator and make war on him. In this manner, the international community was transformed into a triangle of Western powers, which captured the revolution in order to divert it into diplomatic and political action. This process transformed the Libyan revolution and made it pass from a moment of revolution to one of war: it is not clear that the former benefited from this.
***

The year 2011 and the Arab spring remains a date as stirring as 1989 and the end of the dictatorships of the East. It is perhaps more striking, since 1989 marked the end of a process, whereas 2011 signals a beginning. At that time, bipolarity was faltering, and the US-Soviet rivalry was exhausted. What is happening in the Arab world is not the final outcome of a process, but the beginning of something new whose direction we do not yet know.

Bertrand BADIE