

# THE STRUGGLE FOR MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY

Why the Arab Street Finally Revolted

*By Shadi Hamid*

It always seemed as if Arab countries were ‘on the brink.’ It turns out that they were. And those who assured us that Arab autocracies would last for decades, if not longer, were wrong. In the wake of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, academics, analysts and certainly Western policymakers must reassess their understanding of a region entering its democratic moment.

What has happened since January disproves longstanding assumptions about how democracies can—and should—emerge in the Arab world. Even the neo-conservatives, who seemed passionately attached to the notion of democratic revolution, told us this would be a generational struggle. Arabs were asked to be patient, and to wait. In order to move toward democracy, they would first have to build a secular middle class, reach a certain level of economic growth, and, somehow, foster a democratic culture. It was never quite explained how a democratic culture could emerge under dictatorship.

In the early 1990s, the United States began emphasizing civil society development in the Middle East. After the attacks of September 11, 2001, the George W. Bush administration significantly increased American assistance to the region. By fiscal year 2009, the level of annual U.S. democracy aid in the Middle East was more than the total amount spent between 1991 to 2001.<sup>1</sup>

But while it was categorized as democracy aid, it wasn’t necessarily meant to promote democracy. Democracy entails ‘alternation of power,’ but most NGOs that received Western assistance avoided anything that could be construed as supporting a change in regime.

▷ Egyptians protesting in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Feb. 10, 2011. *Amel Pain/EPA/Corbis*

The reason was simple. The U.S. and other Western powers supported ‘reform,’ but they were not interested in overturning an order which had given them pliant, if illegitimate, Arab regimes. Those regimes became part of a



comfortable strategic arrangement that secured Western interests in the region, including a forward military posture, access to energy resources and security for the state of Israel. Furthermore, the West feared that the alternative was a radical Islamist takeover reminiscent of the Iranian revolution of 1979.

The regimes themselves—including those in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Algeria, and Yemen—dutifully created the appearance of reform, rather than its substance. Democratization was ‘defensive’ and ‘managed.’ It was not meant to lead to democracy but rather to prevent its emergence. What resulted were autocracies always engaging in piecemeal reform but doing little to change the underlying power structure. Regime opponents found themselves ensnared in what political scientist Daniel Brumberg called an ‘endless transition.’<sup>2</sup> This endless transition was always going to be a dangerous proposition, particularly in the long run. If a transition was promised and never came, Arabs were bound to grow impatient.

How, then, does change occur? The U.S. and European policy communities coalesced around the notion of ‘gradualism.’ Nearly everyone said they supported the objective of Arab democracy but few seemed to think that anything creative or bold should be done to bring it about. It made more sense to focus on economic reform first and political change later. Perhaps it was just a matter of being realistic, of accepting that politics—and, by extension, foreign policy—was the art of the possible. Revolution was impossible.

Hundreds of millions of dollars in Western assistance poured into the Arab world, assisting small NGOs, supporting often weak political parties, and empowering women to run for parliaments that had little power in the first place. This aid, while crucial for organizations with no source of indigenous funding, fell well short of what was required—a comprehensive, aggressive program supporting democratization.

There was something admirable about pro-democracy organizations like the National Endowment for Democracy and the National Democratic Institute working under difficult constraints, trying to push Arab regimes to open up, even if slightly. They were funded by successive U.S. administrations that were not, in fact, ready for actual democracy. Supporting civil society and offering training and technical assistance to secular political parties seemed like a workable compromise.

### **Colored Revolutions**

During the Colored Revolutions, the West had played an altogether different role, offering critical support not just for change but regime change. In both the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine, the trigger was stolen elections. Independent media played a key role in publicizing the fraud. The founder of Rustavi-2, one of Georgia’s most watched channels and the voice of the opposition,

had set up the station with the assistance of a USAID-funded nonprofit called Internews. On November 2, 2003, the day of the contested polls, and during the vote count, Rustavi-2 ran a scroll on the screen comparing the official results to the parallel vote count and exit polling, which was funded in part by Western governments and NGOs. Meanwhile, Pravda Ukraine, an important media outlet during the Orange Revolution, was operating out of Washington, DC and relied almost entirely on Western funding.

In Serbia, Otpor ('Resistance'), a student group, had been central in the overthrow of President Slobodan Milosevic in the year 2000. Otpor was directly funded by both the U.S. government and nongovernmental sources. USAID directly gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to the student group. Reportedly, a considerable amount was also channeled through covert American aid. Otpor's Ukrainian counterpart Pora ('High Time') also received direct funding from Western governments. Meanwhile, George Soros's Open Society Institute funded explicitly revolutionary activities. In the summer of 2003, OSI organized the visit of leading Otpor activists to train over one thousand young Georgians in nonviolent resistance.

Unlike the often impenetrable and calibrated language it used in addressing the Arab world, the West's rhetoric in Eastern Europe was clear and unapologetic. During Ukraine's second round of elections in November 2004, President George W. Bush sent Senator Richard Lugar as his special envoy. Lugar issued a forceful statement condemning President Leonid Kuchma's government for election fraud. Soon after, Secretary of State Colin Powell refused to recognize the election results and warned that "if the Ukrainian government does not act immediately and responsibly, there will be consequences for our relationship, for Ukraine's hopes for a Euro-Atlantic integration, and for individuals responsible for perpetrating fraud." As political scientist Michael McFaul recounts, the protestors in Maidan Square applauded when Powell's statement was read.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Lech Walesa, Poland's first democratically elected president, assured the crowd that the West was on their side. The West had aligned itself with revolution.

### **The West and the Arab World**

The Tunisian and Egyptian regimes fell faster than anyone could have expected. But it also took longer than anyone should have imagined. Where opposition groups in Eastern Europe came to count on Western support, in the Arab world, they often found themselves standing alone.

In September 2010, I asked a senior figure in Ayman Nour's Al-Ghad ('Tomorrow') party why liberal groups were having so much trouble gaining traction. "Everywhere else," he told me, "the reformers had the support of the international community.

We don't have that." Indeed, there had always been a pervasive sense among Arab opposition groups—especially in Egypt and Jordan, two of the largest recipients of U.S. aid—that they were fighting on two fronts, not only repressive regimes but their Western backers as well. Before the revolution, Ahmed Maher, a leader of Egypt's left-leaning April 6 Movement, put it this way: "The problem isn't with [President Hosni] Mubarak's policies. The problem is with American policy and what the American government wants Mubarak to do. His existence is totally in their hands."

It may have been the case that America's influence—and leverage with Arab autocrats—was on the decline. Perceptions, however, are more important than an objective assessment of U.S. capabilities. The Arab opposition attributed outsize importance to the West's ability to direct and determine its own fortunes. This sense of powerlessness fueled burgeoning Arab anger and frustration as well as widespread anti-Americanism. Perceived U.S. bias toward Israel was central, but so too was the general sense that the West had blocked, sometimes purposefully, the natural development of an entire people and region. That reality put Arab opposition groups in the awkward situation of seeing America as the hope for democracy but, at the same time, hating it for falling so short.

Similarly, Islamist leaders would often speak of an 'American veto' used by U.S. and European officials to block democratic outcomes not to their liking. As senior Muslim Brotherhood leader Essam El-Erian told me at the height of regime repression in 2008: "Even if you come to power through democratic means, you are facing an international community that doesn't accept the existence of the Islamist representation. This is a problem. I think this will continue to present an obstacle for us until there is a real acknowledgement of the situation."

In recent years, a growing academic literature and considerable empirical support have pointed to the critical role of international actors in bringing down autocrats. In their recent book, Steve Levitsky and Lucan Way provide extensive empirical support to what many have long argued. They write, "It was an externally driven shift in the cost of suppression, not changes in domestic conditions, that contributed most centrally to the demise of authoritarianism in the 1980s and 1990s." Levitsky and Way find that "states' vulnerability to Western democratization pressure . . . was often decisive."<sup>4</sup> The key word here is "often."

America's staunch support of repressive regimes, and its unwillingness to back pro-democracy movements, helps explain why the Arab world—until January 2011—seemed immune to democratic change. But it does not explain why, finally, Egyptians and Tunisians, with the odds stacked against them, found a way to defy expectations and even history, bringing about their own remarkable revolutions.

## Arab Springs

In 2011, the Middle East witnessed the second ‘Arab Spring’. The first—now somewhat forgotten—took place in 2005. President George W. Bush had announced in November 2003 a “forward strategy for freedom in the Middle East.” In a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy, he declared: “Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe—because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.”

The Bush administration cited democracy promotion among the reasons for its invading Iraq and toppling dictator Saddam Hussein in 2003. As dubious, cynical and inconsistent as they may have been, Bush’s policies helped produce an otherwise unlikely outcome. The year 2005 saw the largest outpouring of pro-democracy activism the region had ever seen up until then. On January 31, 2005, Iraqis braved terrorist threats to cast meaningful ballots for the first time. In Bahrain, fifty thousand Bahrainis—one-eighth of the population—rallied for constitutional reform. And there was, of course, the Cedar Revolution, which led to a removal of Syrian troops from Lebanese territory. The Iraq war frightened Arab regimes into thinking that President Bush was serious about his democratizing mission.

However, after a succession of Islamist election victories in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, the U.S. backed off from its aggressive pro-democracy posture. With a deteriorating security situation in Iraq, a rising Iran, and a smoldering Israeli–Palestinian conflict, Arab democracy came to seem an unaffordable luxury. This was not a time for unsettling friendly Arab autocrats. Their Islamist competitors, known for their inflammatory anti-Americanism, were, at best, an unknown quantity. American policymakers shared an instinctive distrust of Islamists and made little effort to understand how they had changed. At worst, Americans feared, the Islamists would use their newfound power to roll back U.S. influence in the region.

Without America to worry about, regimes felt they could do as they pleased. Beginning in 2006, Egypt experienced the worst wave of anti-Islamist repression since the 1960s, while Jordan, long considered one of the more open, progressive Arab states, gradually descended into full-blown authoritarianism. Nearly every Arab country in the region experienced a decline in political rights and freedoms.

This was the Arab world that the newly elected President Barack Obama had to contend with. Instead of challenging the authoritarian status quo, Obama reluctantly accepted it. In his historic Cairo University address of June 2009, he promised a “new beginning.” Instead, the Obama administration moved to rebuild relationships—frayed from Bush’s democracy posturing—with Egyptian President Mubarak and other autocrats.

President Obama got one thing right—the centrality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict to Arab grievance—but he got another wrong: that conflict was not, nor had it ever been, the most important problem facing the region. But pursuing peace seemed a more promising course than trying to refashion American foreign policy into a force for something—Arab democracy—it had actively resisted the previous five decades. The U.S. needed, or thought it needed, the support of ‘moderate’ Arab regimes to push the peace process forward. What Obama did, albeit unwittingly, was remove the U. S. from its central place in the ongoing Arab conversation over democracy. However hated he was, President Bush had injected himself into the regional debate. The struggle for Arab democracy had been internationalized.

Under President Obama, the U.S. increasingly seemed beside the point. The election of Obama—with his evident desire to build bridges with the Arab world, not to mention his Muslim family and middle name—was the best possible outcome that Arabs could have hoped for. It was difficult to think of an American politician who seemed as sympathetic and thoughtful about the challenges facing the region. But even the best possible outcome wasn’t nearly enough. America’s unwillingness to align itself with democratic forces was not, it seemed, a matter of one president over another, but a structural problem inherent in U.S. foreign policy.

The optimism over the Cairo speech quickly subsided. Somehow, in several Arab countries, U.S. favorability ratings dropped lower under President Obama than they were in the final years of the George W. Bush administration. The months leading up to the Egyptian and Tunisian revolutions were characterized by a renewed despair. The Mubarak regime had embarked on a systematic crackdown on opposition groups and independent media, culminating in perhaps the most rigged elections in the country’s history. The results of the first round—returning 209 out of 211 seats to the ruling party—surprised everyone, including even regime officials hoping for a more ‘credible’ result.

I was in Egypt covering the elections. In the neighborhoods of Medinat Nasr and Shubra, I talked to the Muslim Brotherhood ‘whips’ (the representatives who count the votes). One by one, they ran me through all the violations. They didn’t seem angry as much as resigned. But while opposition groups were demoralized, they, along with a growing number of Egyptians, began to realize, with much greater clarity, that gradual reform from within the system was impossible. The old paradigm—of pushing for small openings from within—was roundly discredited. Calls for civil disobedience and mass protest intensified. The ingredients were there—the anger, disillusion, and the loss of faith in a system made for and by ruling elites. All that was missing was a spark.

## The First Arab Revolution

Before Tunisia, there were no successful examples of popular Arab revolutions. The closest a mass movement came to ousting a regime was in 1991, when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the Algerian elections in what was, up until then, the region's most promising democratic experiment and one of its earliest. With the tacit, and sometimes not so tacit, support of Europe and the United States, the military annulled the polls, banned the FIS, and sent thousands of Islamists to desert camps. "When you support democracy, you take what democracy gives you," U.S. Secretary of State James Baker explained later. "We didn't live with it in Algeria because we felt that the radical fundamentalists' views were so adverse to what we believe in and what we support, and to what we understood the national interests of the United States to be." The fear of Islamists in power paralyzed Western policymakers, turning a difficult situation into a destructive one. The civil war that soon broke out would claim the lives of an estimated one hundred thousand Algerians.

Having a model helps. In Eastern Europe, Kmara copied Otpor and Pora copied Kmara. As Georgian opposition leader Ivane Merabishvili recounts, "all the demonstrators knew the tactics of the revolution in Belgrade by heart. Everyone knew what to do. This was a copy of that revolution, only louder." Until recently, courageous young Arab activists had nothing to copy. That changed, finally, on January 14, 2011, the day that Tunisians toppled President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali.

The model, boiled down to its essence, is devastatingly simple: bring enough people into the streets and overwhelm the regime with sheer numbers. "No state," observes sociologist Charles Kurzman, "can repress all of the people all of the time." Once protesters reach a critical mass, the regime finds itself in a precarious situation. The decision to shoot may temporarily push back protesters, but it is a risky course. The use of lethal force can provide the spark for an embattled opposition, as on Iran's 'Black Friday,' when around a hundred Iranians were killed on the way to their revolution.

Such violence threatens to strip regimes of their last shreds of legitimacy. It also creates sympathy for opposition groups and their cause, spurring financial, moral, and political support from the international community. More importantly, the use of live ammunition on unarmed citizens can often provoke divisions within the regime coalition.

Inevitably, some in the security forces or the military will refuse to obey orders. In the case of Tunisia, the army was simply not willing to oversee a bloodbath to protect President Ben Ali. In the uprising against Libyan leader Muammar Gadhafi that gained momentum in February, the Libyan regime shot down hundreds of peaceful protesters. The move generated an immediate backlash against Gadhafi by

the U.S. and other Western powers, which in recent years had reestablished relations with his regime. As the Filipino opposition figure Francisco Nemenzo once wrote, “It is one thing to shoot peasants in some God-forsaken village and another to massacre middle class dissenters while the whole world is watching.”

International outrage, then, is an essential ingredient. Before the Tunisian revolution, however, it had been almost entirely missing in the peculiar context of the Arab world. With few exceptions, the most popular movements in the Arab world have been led by Islamists, and for Western powers this made them more difficult to support. At the height of international interest in the first ‘Arab Spring,’ Egypt experienced the largest pro-democracy mobilization it had seen in decades. On March 27, 2005, the Muslim Brotherhood staged its first ever protest calling for constitutional reform, after the ruling party forced through amendments that restricted opposition groups’ ability to contest presidential elections. By May, the organization had staged twenty-three demonstrations—an average of one every three days—in fifteen governorates. Some brought out as many as fifteen thousand people. On May 4, the Brotherhood staged a coordinated nationwide protest in ten governorates, with an estimated fifty to seventy thousand protestors. In the course of less than two months, the total participation of Brotherhood members neared one hundred and forty thousand.

Such a show of strength came at a price: nearly four thousand Brotherhood members were arrested. Yet, the international community was largely silent. Paying a high price, the Brotherhood learned its lesson. If that’s what happened when the world was watching, what about when it wasn’t?

### **The New Opposition**

In Tunisia, the Ben Ali regime couldn’t use the Islamist card. Tunisia’s Islamists were either in prison, dead, or in exile. By destroying its main opposition, the regime lost the last justification for its existence. Ben Ali couldn’t argue that he was better than the alternative, because there was no alternative left.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, despite its widespread following, played a significant but relatively limited role in the protests, which it did not endorse until after the success of the first day—January 25—was already apparent. Like Tunisia, Egypt’s was a leaderless movement consisting of angry, ordinary Egyptians who came not with ideologies or partisanship but the simple, overarching demand that President Mubarak step down. Predictably, the regime tried to point the finger at the Brotherhood but the reality in Tahrir Square belied such claims.

That these were leaderless revolutions meant that the regimes had no one to demonize, except their own people. If they shot into the crowd, they were not killing the Muslim Brotherhood but their own brothers, sisters, sons, and daughters. And

when they did kill—over two hundred in Tunisia and at least three hundred eighty-four in Egypt—allied Western powers (and the international media) could no longer turn away.

While Arabs have long blamed the West, and particularly the United States, for supporting their oppressors, this was perhaps the one case where American support ultimately worked to their favor. The Egyptian military and security forces did not enjoy full freedom of action. The U.S., as Egypt's primary benefactor, was watching closely. The Obama administration may have had a high tolerance for regime repression, but it was unlikely to tolerate massacres against peaceful protesters in broad daylight. This, whether indirectly or directly, exerted pressure on regime officials who had to make difficult choices on whether to use force against protesters. The close relationship between the U.S. and Egyptian militaries also offered another important point of leverage in the crucial final days of the revolution, when the military had to decide whether to turn on Mubarak, one of their own.

### **Lessons from the Revolution**

In Tunisia and then Egypt, Arabs discovered a power they did not know they had. These revolutions, as others before them, told a story of strength and safety in numbers. There was no need to follow a sequence—economic reform first, democracy later—or meet a long list of prerequisites. Arabs, it turns out, did not have to wait for democracy. More importantly, they didn't want to. The hundreds of millions of dollars in civil society aid had been rendered beside the point. America's caution, hedging of bets, and fetish for gradualism—previously the hallmarks of hard-headed *realpolitik*—proved both foolhardy and naïve. Of course, Americans always said they knew this: freedom and democracy was not the province of one people or culture, but a universal right.

To Al-Qaeda's dismay, real change does not come through violence. But it doesn't necessarily come through NGOs. Arabs kept on waiting for America to change its policy and divest itself of dictatorship. It never did. So they did. In doing so, they are forcing the U.S. to reconsider five decades of a failed, and failing, policy in the Middle East.

It would be a mistake, though, to conclude that international factors are now irrelevant. In the cases of Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, international pressure, whether from governments or citizens moved by what they saw on television, played a critical role in undermining support for regimes that just months before were thought by many to be invulnerable.

The revolutions are far from complete. Tunisia has faced sporadic violence and a succession of unstable interim cabinets. Despite being the original spark for the

region's uprisings, it has, perhaps predictably, become the forgotten revolution. Egypt is still governed by an institution—the military—that was long the backbone of the Mubarak regime. For many Egyptian activists, March 9 was a turning point, bringing back painful memories. That day, soldiers and plainclothes thugs armed with pipes and electric cables stormed Tahrir Square, detained nearly two hundred people, and then took them to be tortured in a makeshift prison at the Egyptian Museum. As their challenges grow, the country's opposition groups have returned to their old fractious ways. Indeed, democratic transitions are notoriously messy and uncertain. Recognizing this, the Arab world's new emerging democracies will need support and assistance from the international community, including the U.S. This can be done through technical assistance and election monitoring. But more high-level involvement may be necessary as well, by putting pressure on the new governments to uphold their commitments and providing financial incentives to meet certain benchmarks on democratization. The question is whether the U.S. and its European allies, with their cash-strapped governments and skeptical publics, are willing to commit billions of dollars to helping democratize a still-troubled region.

A great deal is at stake. America was rightly credited for helping facilitate transitions in many Eastern European and Latin American countries. If the U.S. is seen as helping make another transition possible, this time in Egypt, Tunisia, and elsewhere, it will give Americans much-needed credibility in the region. Successful transitions could herald a reimagined relationship between the U.S. and the Arab world, something that Obama promised in his 2009 Cairo address but failed to deliver on.

To be sure, the United States has a checkered, tragic history in the region. For decades, the U.S. has been on the wrong side of history, supporting and funding Arab autocrats and undermining nascent democratic movements when they threatened American interests. So critics of Western 'meddling' have a point: whenever the U.S. and Europe interfere in the region, they seem to get it wrong. That is precisely why it's so important that, this time, they get it right. But getting it right requires that the U.S. fundamentally reassess its Middle East policy and align itself with Arab populations and their democratic aspirations. This has not happened.

Egypt and Tunisia, despite all their problems, remain the most promising cases. Elsewhere, the situation is considerably more grave, with U.S.-backed autocrats in Yemen and Bahrain having used unprecedented force against their own citizens. Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Bahrain has fanned the flames of regional sectarianism and made an already explosive situation even worse.

Thus far, the Obama administration has been behind the curve in nearly every country, reacting to rather than shaping events. President Obama adopted a slow and deliberate approach, and refused to take a stronger stand with America's

Yemeni and Gulf allies. Even enemies such as the Syrian regime have so far escaped any real pressure. If anything is clear, it is that Arabs have shown that something more than caution and gradualism is called for in historic moments of change. This time, they—not the international community—are leading the way. But they and their countries need the international community to follow. Otherwise, their revolutions may still fail.

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- 1 Stephen McNerney, “The President’s Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2009: Democracy, Governance, and Human Rights in the Middle East,” Project on Middle East Democracy, May 2008.
  - 2 Daniel Brumberg, “Liberalization Versus Democracy: Understanding Arab Political Reform,” Carnegie Endowment, May 2003, p. 13
  - 3 Michael McFaul, “Ukraine Imports Democracy: External Influences on the Orange Revolution,” *International Security* 32 (Fall 2007): pp. 45–83
  - 4 Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes after the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010)