



ARABS, ENGAGE!

The Outcome is Uncertain, but Citizen Power
Will Drive the Region's Transformation

By Rami G. Khouri

In 2011, the Arab world was in the early months of popular revolutions, uprisings, and various kinds of enhanced citizen activism that had clearly ushered in a historic era of national transformation across the region. There were no obvious indications then of how these movements would change their governance systems (democratic, or autocratic) or even their national configurations (negotiated federations, Kurdish-style de facto autonomy, Sudanese-style secession, or Syrian-style fragmentation into unofficial statelets).

Three years is a very short period of time in the shaping of national identities, the maturation of political cultures, and the stability of pluralistic and satisfying statehood. It would be foolhardy to definitively predict how the ongoing Arab transformations will end up changing societies and states, because of two main factors.

The first is that conditions in every country are so different from one another, because the underlying realities of regime legitimacy and citizen grievances vary so widely, and regime responses similarly run the gamut—from warfare in Libya and Syria and repression in Bahrain, to tough crackdowns on social media dissent in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates and gradual reforms in Jordan, Oman, and Morocco. There has been a range of behavior exhibited by the successor regimes in countries whose leaders were removed, from Tunisia's constitutional transition to Egypt's rollercoaster ride of military, then Islamist, then military, dominance. There has been no single Arab condition or outcome, but a variety of different ones that continue to evolve and will need years to run their courses.

The second reason that it is difficult to know the outcomes of the current transformations is that domestic revolts by citizens who aspire deeply to enjoy the real power and legitimate benefits of genuine citizenship have in some cases become hopelessly entangled

◁ Egyptian protesters in Tahrir Square, Cairo, Jan. 28, 2011. *Victoria Hazou/Associated Press*

in the complex militant dynamics that have long plagued the modern Arab world. The main ones are sectarian tensions; the interference of regional powers such as Iran, Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia; the long-distance interventions by world powers, notably the United States, Russia, China, and France; and the stresses of fierce incompatibilities among the five prevalent forces of state nationalism, ethno-nationalism, Arabism, Islamism, and tribalism.

If this passage of three years precludes definitive conclusions about the new configurations and conditions of Arab countries, it does allow us to identify forces at play across the Arab region in a way that was not so clear in those seminal months of December 2010 through February 2011. The best way to understand current dynamics and try to imagine future ones is to return to the beginning of these uprisings and revolutions, and recognize why discontented citizens rebelled and why they no longer feared the repressive and punitive controls of their own regimes.

That irrepressible force that sent millions of young men and women, and then their parents, into the streets to live free or die was not an isolated or a spontaneous phenomenon that emerged from a vacuum, and could be contained again. Rather, it was the culmination of decades of mistreatment of perhaps several hundred million Arab citizens by the cumulative abuse of—stated most simply—Arab autocrats and police states, Israeli aggressors and colonialists, and foreign invading armies and hegemony. The weight of humiliation, dehumanization, and ultimate despair that defined the lives of so many Arabs was captured on December 17, 2010, by the fruit and vegetable peddler Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire in the rural Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid when within the span of just hours he was mistreated by his local police force and then totally ignored by the local governor's office when he sought a redress of grievance.

Bouazizi's spontaneous act comprised a combination of protest, self-assertion, and defiance that resonated instantly and widely across the entire Arab world. It launched a series of rolling protests and revolutions that have morphed into wars and chaotic conditions in some countries, and slow democratic and constitutional transformations in others. The power of that force—and, most importantly, the reasons that gave birth to it—today continue to define the lives of the same hundreds of millions of Arabs who cheered on Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan revolutions three years ago. How those grievances are channeled into constructive political action will ultimately determine the outcome of these Arab revolutions and uprisings.

Dignity, Opportunity, Justice

The conditions that sparked the Arab citizen revolts—unemployment, poverty, abuse of power, corruption, poor social services, severe well-being disparities,

rampant injustices—persist in all Arab countries, and probably have worsened in most cases since 2011. The citizen-based mass demand for real changes in the exercise of power will persist and strengthen over time, because it *still* stems from Arab citizens' thirst for dignity, opportunity, and social justice. This is why it seems logical to expect that dramatic and unpredictable developments almost certainly await us in the years ahead, just as we have experienced such a wide variety of developments in the past three years. For now, though, we can prudently note a few developments or even trends that seem to recur across much of the Arab world, and that could be taken as a very rudimentary balance sheet of where we are after these three years of historic change.

1. We are dealing with national reconfigurations, rather than only democratic transformations. The initial glee that many Arabs experienced three years ago when spontaneous popular revolutions overthrew dictators included an expectation that citizenries would replace their dictators with more democratic governance systems. The slow and erratic progress to that end in different Arab countries indicates that this remains a goal for most. Yet it is also evident now that we are dealing with much bigger processes and deeper forces than merely linear democratic governance transitions, such as were experienced more smoothly, for example, in Spain after Francisco Franco or Greece following the rule of the junta.

2. The dominant challenge that faces Arab countries is how to shape legitimate citizen-state relationships. The wide historical transformation that plays itself out in different ways across the region is about shaping the relationship of the two foundational elements of national and personal life: Arab statehood and citizenship. Neither statehood nor citizenship were ever defined by the collective will of free Arab men and women, but now we witness some Arab countries grappling with these issues for the first time ever, and often in a messy and inconsistent way. Beyond merely seeking democracy and dignity, Arabs are dealing with far more complex issues related to how individual men and women ensure their rights as citizens within the larger units of their own ethnic, tribal, and sectarian identities and their own sovereign state.

3. The critical core development across the entire region—even in tightly controlled monarchies and traditional security-based republics—is the birth of citizen activism in a public political sphere. Both elements of this seminal development—Arab citizenship and a public political sphere—are unprecedented, and will have historic implications because they form the context within which future change will play itself out. The novelty of our world today is that hundreds of millions of Arab

men and women feel that they are citizens with rights and aspirations that must be acknowledged; and, they are prepared to act in public in order to bring about political changes that respond to their citizenship rights. This public sphere also includes less virtuous actors and deeds, such as violence or old-guard security agencies reasserting control. The new element is that all citizens can now participate in the contestation of public power.

4. The process of citizens working to build new political power systems and even to reconfigure their state and national identity has been messy, erratic, and often violent, for reasons that are more apparent now than they were in early 2011. One reason is the brutal military response of some Arab regimes that are willing to destroy their country in order to remain in power, which has seen some countries sink into devastating wars that accentuate tribal and sectarian forces that in turn make democratic transitions impossible. Another factor is the total lack of experience among all individuals or groups in democratic practices in the Arab region, including the armed forces, Islamists, old-guard autocrats, and secular-nationalist opposition groups. This has made it very difficult to script a smooth constitutional transition to democratic pluralism, even though Tunisia seems to have broken through this barrier and continues to forge ahead. Egypt, Libya, and Yemen each navigate their own chaotic path toward new configurations of power and pluralism, whose outcomes remain unclear—though I suspect that those outcomes will ultimately still be shaped by the consent of those millions of discontented Arab men and women who stood up three years ago to assert their humanity and demand their citizen rights.

Another problem is the continued assertion of the sense of entitlement to rule by military and security authorities in most countries, but most clearly seen in Syria, Bahrain, and Egypt, where officers rather than elected officials still tend to make policy. Many citizens will turn to their security agencies for short-term stability, as we witness in Egypt, which will delay the full transfer of authority to elected civilians. Finally, there is the chronic, extensive web of regional and foreign interventions in the domestic affairs of Arab countries in transition. This includes traditional players such as the United States, France, Britain, Iran, Turkey, and Russia, as well as newfound regional military and financial activism by Hezbollah, Saudi-led Gulf countries, and transnational Salafist-takfiri groups. This has cut short some of the initial democratic transitions, heightened local sectarian cleavages, and transformed citizen uprisings into regional or global proxy wars that are much more violent and difficult to resolve.

5. Consequently, we witness across the Arab world today a most complicated convergence of two contradictory historical dynamics. On one hand, there is stunted

statehood and post-colonial (Western) and neo-imperial (Iranian-Saudi) interventions; on the other hand, the aspirations of hundreds of millions of citizens to live freely and securely in societies that do respect their rights and offer basic opportunities to live a decent life. One day, somehow, after a period of time, the state and the citizen in Arab countries will peacefully agree to new social contracts that have been negotiated by all parties in society, in a consultative and credible manner. Until that day, we will continue to endure the current phase in which all the accumulated ills, distortions, crimes, mediocrities, and incompetencies of the past century of Arab history are flushed out into the open, to be replaced by something better in governance, development, citizenship, and statehood. In other words, for the first time ever in Arab history—ancient or modern—we are witnessing the early stages of a process of genuine national self-determination in which ordinary citizens themselves—not single families or foreign powers—define their state, articulate their national values, and shape public policies.

Romance and Reality

The transformation process takes a very long time to mature and bear fruit. Tunisia is the first Arab country that seems to have passed the initial phase of the process, by formulating a new constitution that genuinely reflects the inputs and interests of all its citizens, i.e., it enjoys the kind of legitimacy that no other Arab constitution in modern history has ever enjoyed, because it was the consensus handiwork of the citizenry in a transparent and deliberative public process.

Other Arab countries move ahead in more erratic fashion. Egypt has had four governments and three constitutions in the past three years, without resolving or even seriously addressing any of the core grievances that matter to ordinary citizens, such as jobs, social justice, and lasting political legitimacy that is anchored in a national consensus. Libya inches toward a constitutional process, but is badly constrained by the threats of armed militias and tribal and regional fissures, as is also the case in Yemen. Syria has become a terrible regional and global proxy war of devastating destruction and inhumanity, and has elicited little serious global concern—because that is the way of all proxy wars, where foreign powers are prepared to fight for years as long as the killing and destruction occur in distant lands. Bahrain remains mired in a deep ideological, political, and sectarian contest that is complicated by the direct military intervention of fellow members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, making this island state an informal adjunct of Saudi Arabia for the time being. Yet many Bahraini citizens continue to agitate for equal rights and representative governance. The crescent spanning Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon in the meantime has emerged as a single arena where the fastest growing movement in

the region—Salafist-takfiri militancy and terrorism—is taking hold and mobilizing tens of thousands of adherents to wage battles to come in other lands, in the Middle East and abroad. Lebanon, Jordan, Sudan, Algeria, Morocco, and other Arab countries have made minor—if any—changes in how power is exercised.

In the context of different change trajectories, people adopt a romantic optimism that diplomacy and democracy will somehow resolve all the region's many problems, or else a despairing pessimism that we are doomed to eternal dictatorships, terrorism, and civil strife. The facts on the ground of the past three and more years suggest that a wider array of options defines our future prospects.

Local and proxy international warfare is clearly one option, as we witness so painfully in Syria, and in a less intense manner in Lebanon, Yemen, Palestine, Bahrain and other Arab lands where weak state systems have allowed regional and international powers to enter into direct combat there.

Terrorism is a second option, as we witness in the growth of Salafist-takfiri movements, including the resurgence of groups in Saharan and East Africa. This kind of violence appears to be increasing in the short run—and it provides no solutions, only perpetual chaos.

Legitimate international diplomacy anchored in the recognized rule of law is an enticing way for the Middle East to move ahead, as evidenced in the past year when the United Nations and international diplomacy played a greater role in several countries. The American-Russian agreements on dealing with the chemical weapons of Syria and the hopeful expectations on multinational negotiations with Iran following the election of President Hassan Rowhani have both included structured and hard-nosed diplomatic wrangling at the bilateral and multilateral levels. Diplomacy in Geneva has emerged as a possible antidote to perpetual war in Syria, but results remain unclear to date. The Special Tribunal for Lebanon in The Hague, which started its court sessions this year, is another sign of diplomatic or legal tools at our disposal.

Lopsided bilateral diplomacy is an approach that refuses to die, as we see between Israel and Palestine, which uses the same failed approach that has seen the Arab-Israeli conflict mired in tension and regular outbreaks of violence for decades now.

Democratic pluralism is the option that has been least adopted but most coveted by the people of the Arab world, as we witness in the current attempts at indigenous consensus-building to write new constitutions and develop legitimate democratic governance systems. Should they come about, such systems can be expected to be stable and capable of driving sustained and equitable socio-economic growth. The Tunisian breakthrough and the ongoing work in Libya, Egypt, and Yemen to create new governance systems that reflect citizens' values and rights suggest how the Arab world can change for the better from within, and on the basis of its own initiatives.

Writing on the Wall

The last three years of Arab revolutions and uprisings have also been accompanied by wars, terrorism, and other negative developments that are frightening, especially in cases like Syria where they decrease the likelihood of a democratic transition in the near future. But it is to Egypt where we must return again and again while undertaking any assessment of the last three years of Arab history and change—because Egypt has always captured the hopes, assets, constraints, and sheer human wonders of the entire Arab world. Events continue to change so rapidly in Egypt that one hesitates to analyze anything that happened after January 2011—because any analysis could quickly become irrelevant due to the new circumstances that will surely occur.

Egypt and its ever-changing dynamics paint a volatile picture of a region lurching forward and backward in its people's determined drive to shape their own political cultures, after over half a century of security-dominated governance systems. Egypt will have a huge impact on developments across the Arab world in the years ahead, but how Egypt itself develops will not be clear for a few more years. It is simplistic and childish to note, as many have in the region and abroad, that the "Arab Spring" has turned into a forlorn autumn or even a dark winter. Such hasty and absolutist verdicts do not acknowledge the time-consuming normal trajectory of the kinds of historic, complex transformations that we are experiencing around the region.

Making the transitions from primitive governance or police state systems to pluralistic democracies that safeguard the equal rights of all citizens requires decades at best, and a century and a half in most cases (as in the American and Western European cases). So three years is a very brief period of time in the very initial phases of our Arab transformations, and it is normal to witness the wild swings, including episodic violence alongside intense constitution-writing. Egypt's most recent developments have been deeply contested by all parties in the country and the region, especially last summer's ousting of the elected Mohamed Morsi government, the banning of his Muslim Brotherhood, the designation of a transitional government by the armed forces, the referendum to approve a new constitution that was written by a hand-picked group of people in five months, and the preparation for new presidential and parliamentary elections. Political change moves ahead alongside polarized and violent street confrontations that result in the deaths of civilians and security personnel alike.

Egypt also reminds us again of the need to go back to the start of these revolutions and uprisings, in order to remember again and again what drove people to revolt. The most fascinating thing I saw in Cairo during a visit in early 2014 was the range of graffiti related to the constitutional referendum and the assumption

of power by the armed forces after they removed President Morsi. Graffiti was scrawled across walls, advertising billboards, street signs, flower pots, park benches, and any other surface that allowed Egyptians to express their political sentiments. This captured for me those two important historical developments of the past three years: the birth of Arab citizens, who engage one another in a public political sphere.

The content of the graffiti was telling. The formal public space of Cairo (billboards, advertisement panels, newspapers and magazine covers on the sidewalks) was dominated by admonitions to vote ‘yes’ in the referendum and support the interim government installed by Field Marshal Abdul Fattah El-Sisi and his military colleagues. The walls and other informal spaces reflected many more varied views, including the very common statement “*yasqut kul min kban, ‘askar, fulul, ikhwan*” (“down with all those who betrayed us; the military, the old guard, and the Muslim Brothers”). Other graffiti called El-Sisi a killer, or warned that another revolution was imminent. The military-appointed government tried in places to paint over the graffiti but gave up after every wall it painted white was full of graffiti again twenty-four hours later.

So the new public political sphere that continues to experience its birth across Egypt lurches back and forth between popular sentiments that support and oppose all three principal actors who have dominated the public power structure in the past few years—the old guard of the Mubarak era, the military, and the Muslim Brotherhood. A large majority of Egyptians seem to support El-Sisi’s plan to restore order and move the country forward, but other Egyptians challenge that idea and are not afraid to make their views known. The new element today that did not exist three years ago, and that Egypt displays, is that those who control the power structure—currently the second military republic in three years—do not totally control the public sphere, the walls, or the minds of all Egyptians.

That is a meaningful milestone as we enter the fourth year of the Egyptian and other Arab uprisings that cannot be denominated in seasons of the year, but rather only in the attitudes of individual citizens who yearn to live in freedom and dignity, and are determined to express themselves politically and in public to achieve that noble end. Other Arab countries share this same experience, in different forms. Where it all leads, we cannot know today. But listen to the Arab citizens who now express themselves in the public political sphere. Their sentiments ultimately will determine if we move ahead to credible democracies or linger in long-term autocratic bondage.

The reality of the troubling possibility of a long-term Arab fate at the hands of self-imposed and unaccountable autocrats was brought home to the region’s people again in March and April 2014 in several countries. President Bashar Al-Assad of

Syria announced his plan to run again for the office that he and his father before him have held for forty-four years. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika of Algeria successfully won election for a fourth consecutive term in office, despite his being virtually physically incapacitated. President Omar Hassan Al-Bashir of Sudan has been in power for twenty-five years, has been indicted for war crimes and for crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court, has wreaked destruction and sectarian warfare throughout the country, and has seen the south of Sudan reach the point of disenchantment that it seceded peacefully and yet he still treats his citizens like listless buffoons whom he assumes will believe his recently announced plans to initiate political reforms to promote pluralism and democracy.

Such disdain by Arab autocrats for their own people has defined much of the modern Arab world for half a century, but it has now finally been breached in the past three years by popular uprisings that are in their early stages of reconfiguring and re-legitimizing political governance systems. One of the ugly lessons of this short period has been the ferocious will of some Arab autocrats to stay in power at any cost, even the cost of destroying their countries. Watching millions of brave Arab men and women fight for their citizen rights, their dignity and their very humanity since December 2010, my guess is that the forces of light and life will ultimately defeat the purveyors of darkness and death amongst us.