Whither 'Arab Spring'?

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Introduction

Since December 2010, the 'Arab Spring' has featured techniques of civil resistance in sustained campaigns involving strikes, demonstrations, marches and rallies, as well as the use of the new social media to organize, communicate, and raise awareness in the face of state attempts at repression and censorship. In the case of Tunisia, Egypt, and — most dramatically — Libya, the protests have actually led to the departure of long-established regimes, whereas the situation in Syria and Bahrain remains unsettled to date.

Among the causes for the increased readiness for protest was public anger with the authoritarian regimes and the almighty security apparatus, as well as corruption in government, economy and administration. Another significant cause was high unemployment, in particular among the younger generation, and growing poverty which might be seen as another reason for the willingness to protest. To this might be added rising food and energy prices worldwide, affecting large segments of the population.

In addition to this widespread dissatisfaction with 'the system', modern communication technologies (mobile phones, the internet, but also the reception of satellite TV channels, especially *Al Jazeera*) encouraged the protests. This strong mobilisation on the internet was carefully cultivated from the early years after 2000 by mobile phones, and platforms such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and blogs. Thus an information structure outside the state-controlled 'mainstream' media was made possible, further encouraging the protests. With regard to the demonstrations in Egypt, however, I would argue that the role played by this internet communication was perhaps more *supportive* than fundamental as the internet was also used for camouflaged distribution of government propaganda. A further evidence for this *supportive* character of the internet was the fact that the protests continued unabated even after the government had switched it off.

Interesting also is what has been termed by some observers 'the absence of Islam'¹ in most of those struggles – perhaps with certain exceptions in Egypt and Syria:

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While most of the recent movements in the Muslim world have been spearheaded by Islamic parties and leaders, the 'Arab Spring' is – surprisingly to those on the Islamist fringe – led by civil society, especially the youth. It seems that the people in the streets were more interested in improving their lives as self-determining human beings than in establishing 'theocracies' à la khomenienne.

Opinions

In the West, there were a variety of evaluations at the outset of the popular protest movements that shook the Arab world at the beginning of 2011. Strangely, many observers at the more or less highly paid think-tanks of Europe and the United States didn't either see or just underestimated the deeply rooted desire of the Arab people for freedom, prosperity, democracy and the rule of law – a desire which was perhaps seen as a prerogative of 'the West'. Many of them seem to have been simply too accustomed to prevailing situations, such as Mr Mubarak, a 'friend' and 'ally' who had been around for three decades.

To my mind, however, the events have changed the psyche of the Arab peoples and the balance of power in the region. The international community must recognize that it has dealt with questionable regimes and that it was initially not an Islamist uprising, but a democratic protest. Of course, in every Arab country specific conditions do prevail, but we are now facing very similar challenges. People have followed the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and had the feeling that they were actually part of the process itself. "They have fought 'virtually' at the side of Tunisians and Egyptians. They shared joy and fear, and in this manner their success had become the victory for all the Arabs."²

During a radio interview with the German broadcaster *Deutschlandfunk*, however, the orientalist Hans-Peter Raddatz actually doubted whether true democracies would be the result of these revolutions – especially with regard to recent developments in Egypt. According to Raddatz, "[a] democracy could not be outlined on the drawing board," and added that Islam without secularisation would not be compatible with Western-style democracy.³ On the other hand, based on the late Samuel Huntington's 'democratisation theory', Kenan Engin, another observer, speaks of a 'fifth wave of democratisation' and invokes parallels to the 'third wave of democratisation' in Latin America during the 1970s and '80s.⁴ In a guest article for the Swiss *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, the German journalist Adrian Lobe, opined that the riots in North Africa and in the Middle East did *not* represent a democracy movement but rather prosperity revolts (*Wohlstandsrevolten*). As evidence, he referred to the situation in Saudi Arabia where the regime attempts to 'quiet' the population with generous gifts and where there have been so far (with certain exceptions in the Shi'ite-dominated Gulf coast region of the kingdom) no major protests. Lobe derives from this that the material

factors such as education, employment, and prosperity were at the foreground at the riots elsewhere in the Arab world.⁵ Fareed Zakaria, CNN-host, journalist, and former editor of the magazine *Newsweek*, has offered a similar approach of modernisation theory, arguing that certain socio-economic thresholds would need to be crossed in order to arrive at a revolution. Zakaria sets these at a per capita income of around US\$8,000. States in which this level is not achieved (e.g. Morocco) would therefore have a lesser chance to achieve sustainable social change than wealthier and more developed countries.

Perspectives?

From the perspective of early 2012, the 'Arab Spring' has come a long way, from the self-immolation of a young Tunisian man in protest of the corruption and injustice of the Ben Ali regime to the fall of – so far – three dictatorships in the Arab world; two of them – Egypt and Tunisia – formerly staunch allies of the West and one – Gaddafi's Libya – once a powerful promoter of international terrorism.

So where are we going from here? I would like to focus in the following primarily on two things: one is the offer of a great opportunity for forging a completely new setting of relations between the West and the Muslim world – the Arab part of it in particular. The other issue is the role – if any – played by Islam within those developments. In addition, I would like to consider the 'Arab Spring' in essence as only one manifestation (among many others) of current worldwide public anger against 'those in charge up there' and a drive toward a *truly* democratic renewal of our world.

We are living in the age of *Facebook* and *Twitter* where people(s) all over the world – not only Arabs – seem to have lost their patience with unfulfilled promises on the part of their rulers. News of suppressed demonstrations and other outpourings of public anger continue to be spread by the new social media – thus sidelining and often making irrelevant the official ones such as BBC or CNN, to name only a few.

Returning to the Middle East, there as in the West the people that are now still on the streets are demanding their right to determine their future by themselves. However, it is very interesting – and perhaps also quite revealing – how western nations have reacted so far to the outbreaks of public anger in the various Middle Eastern countries. It appears – at least to me – that those reactions have been based on the particular political, economic, and strategic interests of those western nations in those countries.

To my mind, there is the real danger that disillusioned and unemployed youths in the Arab world will fall prey to the catch-it-all paroles of the Islamists. There are already indications that Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia are in a particularly dangerous situation in this regard, and I see in the recent attacks on Coptic churches and in the

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one-sided response of the Egyptian police and army some rather worrying signs of moves in that direction.⁶

Being originally an Iranicist, I often feel sadly reminded of Pahlavi Iran in the 1970s, a period which too was marked by high unemployment, economic downturn, and political repression by a dictatorial regime. The resulting Iranian revolution of 1978/79 was eventually 'hijacked' by Khomeini and his Islamist followers. It can only be hoped that a similar scenario is not going to repeat itself in the Arab world today, although I am less and less convinced that it will ultimately be the democratic forces which will be victorious in the end.

I would then argue that although it might be true that the Islamists appear to have totally missed the *early* stages of the 'Arab Spring', they now appear very well to be at the head of the revolutionary movements. To my mind, at least in Egypt there can be no doubt that Islamists will have a say in influencing public opinion after the initial successes of the Egyptian Revolution which led to the departure of the pro-western Mubarak regime. However, the transition toward a sustainable democracy can only succeed if democratic rules are also part and parcel of political life and if the planned presidential and parliamentary elections are actually free and fair.

From the perspective of *serious* political observers and Middle East experts then, since the beginning of the 'Arab Spring' the question has been what role would be played by the Islamists. This is an obvious as well as legitimate concern since it had been almost entirely been Islamic groups - moderate as well extremist ones - which constituted since the early 1970s the largest and at the same time most powerful opposition to the region's ruling regimes. Until recently, it was pluralism and democracy-friendly slogans in particular which dominated the demonstrations in Egypt and elsewhere while Islamist groups have tried their best not to come out of their cover. However, in the midst of the tensions over the text of the new Egyptian Constitution the Islamists resolved to give a demonstration of their power which revealed the major dividing lines between the political groups in Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world. During the massive Islamist protests of 29 July 2011 at Cairo's Tahrir Square, for instance, religious slogans could be heard which were echoed in the rest of the Arab world and which posed the question as to which direction the 'Arab Spring' would eventually move: toward a pluralistic democracy or religious authoritarianism.7

Conclusions and Recommendations

In sum then, religion -any religion, as Europeans too had to experience in the course of their history - is generally very suitable for instrumentalisation. Religion, however, is ambivalent. It can *promote* civilisation - but it can also *hamper* it! The future development of the Muslim countries in particular is not possible without a

minimum level of freedom, accountability and good governance. Recent initiatives by international leaders such as the 'Global Movement of Moderates' launched by Malaysia's current Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak – a loose confederation of likeminded individuals, organisations, state-actors, non-state actors and intelligentsia – can play a major part in diffusing tensions.⁸

With regard to the post-'Arab Spring' countries, I would like to remind readers of the following:

- Lengthy phases of transition may ultimately play into the hands of radical groups. Free and fair elections are thus needed as soon as possible. The elections would eventually reduce each group to its *actual* size and replace the slogans of the roaring mob on the street with debates in parliament.
- Conservative forces in the Arab world especially certain countries in the Gulf region would certainly welcome any Islamist coup as this would break the wave of democratisation by proving that any kind of revolution would ultimately lead to 'Islamisation'. Such a scenario would also strengthen Islamist positions *vis-à-vis* the penetration of democratic ideas in society.
- Certain conservative regimes would do well to think more carefully in terms of what they *really* want as a 'fundamentalist' Egypt would probably undergo a difficult time in trying to arrange its strategic and economic ties. One can probably safely assume that its political and economic alignment would roughly match that of Pakistan. The elites of the Gulf countries should therefore think whether they would like to have a 'new Pakistan' in their neighbourhood or rather a 'new Turkey'.
- Islamist slogans will have a significant impact on public opinion and the development in other Arab countries above all if they continue and if they are monitored attentively in the media. In Syria, the protest movement suffers from the dispute between the Islamists and pro-democratic groups. In Tunisia too the future role and influence of the Islamic party there, al-Nahdah, is definitely anything but certain in spite or even *because* of the recent success at the elections.

In closing, a veritable internal cultural war is currently taking place in the countries of the 'Arab Spring'. The strength of the respective positions is still difficult to assess. The outcome of this dispute will decide whether a democratic development will be possible in the future. In the end, however, the *only* effective antidote against the dangers for liberty is *more* democracy.

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Notes

1. See, for instance, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, "The Absence of Islam in Arab Spring," *New Straits Times* [Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia], 4 June 2011, available online at http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/20spring/Article/#ixzz1OpvoO5OA (accessed on 5 October 2011).

- 2. Ulrich Leidholdt, "Analyse zur Revolution in Nahost: Arabischer Aufstand ein Erfolg für die ganze Region?" *Tagesschau.de* [Germany], 16 February 2011, available online at http://www.tagesschau.de/ausland/arabischeraufstand100.html (accessed on 11 October 2011).
- 3. Deutschlandfunk, "Demokratie und Islam," 28 February 2011, available online at http://www.dradio.de/dlf/sendungen/interview_dlf/1399235/ (accessed on 11 October 2011).
- 4. See Kenan Engin, "The Arab Spring: The 5.0 Democracy Wave," Hürriyet Daily News [Istanbul, Turkey], 19 August 2011, available online at http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/n.php?n=the-arab-spring-the-5.0-democracy-wave-2011-08-19 (accessed on 11 October 2011); idem, "," Journal of Turkish Weekly [Ankara, Turkey], 22 September 2011, available online at http://www.turkishweekly.net/op-ed/2881/the-arab-spring-and-the-waves-of-democracy.html (accessed on 11 October 2011).
- Adrian Lobe, "Der Mythos vom Demokratie-Virus," Neue Zürcher Zeitung [Zurich, Switzerland], 8 March 2011, available online at http://www.nzz.ch/nachrichten/startseite/der_mythos_vom_demokratie-virus 1.9805355.html (accessed on 11 October 2011).
- David D. Kirkpatrick, "Copts Denounce Egyptian Government Over Killings," New York Times, 10
 October 2011, available online at http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/11/world/middleeast/coptics-criticize-egypt-government-over-killings.html (accessed on 11 October 2011).
- "Islamisch, islamisch... Ägypten bleibt islamisch???," Kopten ohnen Grenzen, 30 July 2011, available online at http://koptisch.wordpress.com/2011/07/30/islamisch-islamisch-agypten-bleibtislamisch/ (accessed on 17 October 2011).
- 8. See on this also Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Moderation and Balance in Islam: The Qur'ānic Principle of *Wasatiyyah* (Kuala Lumpur: IAIS Malaysia, 2011, IAIS Malaysia Monograph no. 1).