

A New Arab Street in Post-Islamist Times



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The popular uprising in Tunisia has surprised many - Western observers, the Arab elites, and even those who have generated this remarkable episode. The surprise seems justified. How could one imagine that a campaign of ordinary Tunisians in just over one month would topple a dictator who presided over a police state for 23 years? This is a region where the life expectancy of 'presidencies' match only the 'eternal' rule of its sheiks, kings, and Ayatollahs who bank on oil and political rent (Western protection) to hang onto their power and subjugate their people. But the wonder about the Jasmine revolution - and the subsequent mass protests in Algeria, Yemen, Jordan, and more spectacularly in Egypt's numerous cities on Jan. 25, 2011 - also comes from a common mistrust among the Arab elites and their outside allies about the so called 'Arab street' - one that is simultaneously feared and pitied for its 'dangerous irrationality' and 'deplorable apathy.'

But history gives us a more complex picture. Neither 'irrational' and prone to riots nor 'apathetic' and 'dead,' the Arab street conveys collective sentiments and dissent expressed by diverse constituencies who possess few or no effective institutional channels to express discontent. The result is a street politics where Arabs nonetheless find ways to express their views and interests. Today the Arab street is shifting. With new players and means of communication, it may usher some far reaching changes in the region's politics.

There is a long history of such "street" politics in the Arab world. Popular movements arose to oppose colonial domination as in Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon during the late 1950s

after Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal. The unsuccessful tripartite aggression by Britain, France and Israel in October 1956 to reclaim control of the canal caused an outpouring of popular protests in Arab countries in support of Egypt. The turbulent years following 1956 were probably the last for a major pan-Arab solidarity movement until the pro-Palestinian wave of 2002. But social protests by workers,

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artisans, women and students for domestic social development, citizens' rights and political participation continued even as the Arab state grew more repressive. The 1980s saw waves of wild cat strikes and street protests in Morocco, Sudan, Lebanon, Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt protesting cut backs in consumer commodity subsidies, price rises, pay cuts and layoffs -- developments largely associated with the IMF-recommended structural adjustment programs. In the meantime, the bulging student population continued to play a key role in the popular movements either along the secular-nationalist and leftist forces or more recently under the banner of Islamism.

The first Palestinian *Intifada* (1987 to 1993), one of the most grassroots-based mobilizations in the Middle East during the past century, combined demand for self-rule with democratic governance, and the reclaiming of individual and national dignity. Triggered by a fatal accident caused by an Israeli truck driver, and against the backdrop of years of occupation, the uprising included almost all of the Palestinian population, in particular women and children, who resorted to non-violent methods of resistance to the occupation, such as civil disobedience, strikes, demonstrations, withholding taxes, and product boycotts. Led mainly by the local leaders, the movement built on popular committees (e.g., women's, voluntary work, and medical relief) to sustain itself, while serving as the embryonic institutions of a future independent Palestinian state. That *Intifada* remains a role model and inspiration to today's protesters.

The late 1990s and 2000s produced the next great wave of Arab street politics, a wave which continues today. Arab street politics assumed a distinctively pan-Arab expanse in response to Israel's incursions into the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, and the Anglo-U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq. For a short while, the Arab states seemed to lose their tight control, and publicly vocal opposition groups proliferated,

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even among the "Westernized" and "apolitical" segments of the population. Millions marched in dozens of Arab cities to protest what they considered the U.S.-Israeli domination of the region. These campaigns that were directed against *outside* forces sometimes enjoyed the tacit approval of the Arab states, as way of redirecting popular dissent against their own

repressive governments. For a long while, Arab states managed to neutralize the political class by promulgating a common discourse based on nativism, religiosity, and anti-Zionism, while severely restricting effective opposition against their own regimes.

Things, however, appear to be changing. There are now signs of a new Arab street with post-nationalist, post-Islamist visions and novel forms of mobilization. The 2004 democracy movement in Egypt - with the Kifaya at the core - mobilized thousands of middle class professionals, students, teachers, judges, and journalists who called for an end to Emergency Law, release of political prisoners, end to torture, and end to Hosni Mubarak's presidency. Building directly on the activities of the Popular Committee for Solidarity with the Palestinian, this movement chose to work with 'popular forces' rather than traditional opposition parties, bringing the campaign into the streets instead of broadcasting it from headquarters, and focused on domestic issues rather than simply international demands.

More recently, the 'Cedar Revolution,' a grassroots movement of some 1.5 million Lebanese from all walks of life demanding a meaningful sovereignty, democracy, and an end to foreign meddling, resulted in the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon in 2005. The Iranian Green wave, a pervasive democracy movement that emerged following the 2009 fraudulent Presidential elections, has served as a prelude to what are now the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, and the current uprising in the streets of Egypt. These are all breaks from traditional Arab politics in that they project a new post-Islamist and post-ideological struggle which combine the concerns for national dignity with social justice and democracy. These movements are pluralistic in constituencies, pursue new ways of mobilizing (such as boycott campaigns, cyber-activities and protest art) and are weary of the traditional party politics.

Why this change? Certainly there is the long-building youth bulge and the spread of new information technology (Internet, e-mail,

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and especially satellite TV like Al-Jazeera). Frustrated youth are now rapidly moving to exploit these new resources to assert themselves and to mobilize. For instance, Egyptian youth used Facebook to mobilize some 70,000 mostly educated youth who made calls for free speech, economic welfare, and the elimination of corruption. Activists succeeded in organizing street protests, rallies and more spectacularly initiating a general strike on April 6, 2008 to support the striking textile workers. The January 25 mass demonstration in Egypt was primarily organized through Facebook and Twitter. These modes and technologies of mobilization seem to play a crucial role in the Tunisian uprising.

But there is more happening here than only information technology. The social structure throughout the region is changing rapidly.

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There is an explosion of mass educational institutions which produce higher levels of literacy and education, thus enhancing the class of educated populace. At the same time, these societies are rapidly becoming urban. By far more people live in the cities than in rural areas (just below Central and Eastern Europe). A creeping urbanity is permeating into the traditional rural societies-- there are modern divisions of labor, modern schools, expanding service works, electrification, and especially a modern communications system(phone lines, cars, roads, and minibuses) which generate time-space compression between the 'urban'

and 'urban' worlds. The boundary between 'urban' and 'rural' is becoming increasingly blurred and 'rural' populations are no longer rural in the traditional sense.

But a key change is the emergence of a 'middle class poor' (with significant political implications) at the expense of the decline of the more traditional classes and their movements - notably, peasant organizations, cooperative movements and trade unions. As peasants have moved to the city from the countryside, or lost their land to become rural day laborers, the social basis of peasant and cooperative movements has eroded. The weakening of economic populism, closely linked to structural adjustment, has led to the decline of public sector employment, which constituted the core of trade unionism. Through reform, downsizing, privatization and relocation, structural adjustment has undermined the unionized public sector, while new private enterprises linked to international capital remain largely union-free. Although the state bureaucracy remains weighty, its underpaid employees are unorganized, and a large proportion of them survive by taking second or third jobs in the informal sector. Currently, much of the Arab work force is self-employed. Many wage-earners work in small enterprises where paternalistic relations prevail. On average, between one third and one half of the urban work force are involved in the unregulated, unorganized informal sector. Lacking institutional channels to make their claims, streets become the arena for the expression of discontent.

And all these are happening against the background of expanding educational institutions, especially the universities which produce hundreds of thousands of graduates each year. They graduate with new status, information, and expectations. Many of them are the children of comfortable parents or the traditional rural or urban poor. But this new generation is different from their parents in outlook, exposure, social standing, and expectations. Unlike the post-colonial socialist and statist modernization era that elevated the

college graduates as the builders of the new nation, the current neo-liberal turn has failed to offer most of them an economic status that could match their heightened claims and global dreams. They constitute the paradoxical class of 'middle class poor' with high education, self-constructed status, wider world views, and global dreams who nonetheless are compelled -- by unemployment and poverty -- to subsist on the margins of neo-liberal economy as casual, low paid, low status and low-skilled workers (as street vendors, sales persons, boss boys or taxi drivers), and to reside in the overcrowded slums and squatter settlements of the Arab cities. Economically poor, they still fantasize about an economic status that their expectations demand -- working in IT companies, secure jobs, middle class consumption patterns, and perhaps migration to the West.

The 'middle class poor' are the new proletariat of the Middle East, who are very different from their earlier counterpart -- in their college education, knowledge of the

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world, expectations that others have of them, and with a strong awareness of their own deprivation. Mohamed Bouazizi, the street vendor who ignited himself and a revolution in Tunisia represented this 'middle class poor.' The politics that this class pursued in the 1980s and 1990s was expressed in Islamism as the most formidable opposition to the secular undemocratic regimes in the region. But Islamism itself has faced a crisis in recent years, not least because it is seriously short of democracy. With the advent of post-Islamist conditions in the Muslim Middle East, the 'middle class poor' seems to pursue a different, post-Islamist, trajectory.

Will the Tunisian uprising unleash democratic revolution in the Arab world? The

events in Tunisia have already caused mass jubilations among the people, and a profound anxiety among the power elites in the region. Mass protests have broken out in Egypt, Algeria, and Jordan, and Yemen, while leaders are in quandary as to how to react. The possibility of similar trajectories in the region depends primarily on how the incumbent regimes will behave. The grim reality is that precisely because a democratic revolution has occurred in Tunisia, it might not happen elsewhere at least in the short run. This paradox reminds one of the Bolshevik Revolution's loneliness in Europe, and the Islamic Revolution in the Middle East. Those revolutions did inspire similar movements around the world, but they also made the incumbent states more vigilant not to allow (by reform or repression, or both) similar outcomes to unfold in their backyards.

Yet in the longer term their efforts may not be enough. The structural changes (educational development, public role of women, urban expansion, new media and information venues, next to deep inequalities and corruption) are likely to make these developmentalist authoritarian regimes - whether Libya, Saudi-Arabia, Iran or Egypt - more vulnerable. If dissent is controlled by rent-subsidized welfare handouts, any economic downturn and weakening of provisions is likely to spark popular outrage.

At stake is not just jobs and descent material welfare; at stake is also people's dignity and pursuit of human and democratic rights. As we have seen so powerfully in Tunisia, the translation of collective dissent into collective action and sustained campaign for change has its own intriguing and often unpredictable dynamics. This explains why we keep getting surprised in this part of the world -- revolutions happen where we do not expect, and they do not happen where we do. After all, who sensed the scent of Jasmine in the backstreets of Tunisia just a few weeks ago?

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