

The Arabic Middle East 2011

# Revolution or Revolt?



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**The dramatic events touched off in the Arab Middle East after a Tunisian street vendor set himself aflame in December of 2010 – now being described as “revolutions” and an “Arab Spring” – have already resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Why has such tragedy resulted? What future lies ahead for the Middle East?**

The “Arab Spring” is a consequence of a deep crisis in which the societies and economies of the Middle East found themselves. Developmental problems remained unsolved for many years, until the people simply told the authorities: “Enough is enough!” People are out demanding “democracy, respect, and dignity,” but what they really want are jobs, fair wages, and access to schools and hospitals. The crisis in the Arab Middle East involves everything – water, energy, food, and work. “We have needs, needs, needs!” – this is the real cry that can be heard across the Middle East.

## **\$2 a day**

The underlying causes of the crisis are demographic in nature. The Arab Middle East’s population has grown fivefold in the 20th century, and the growth rate is still high at 2.3%. At the beginning of the twentieth century Egypt had 20 million inhabitants, now the number has risen to 85 million. In 2050, the country will be home to 121 million people. The majority of Egyptians live on state subsidies, and almost 40 million earn around \$2 a day. The region has the youngest population in the

world: nearly three-quarters of Arabs are under 30 years of age. As Hillary Clinton said, “Across the region, one in five young people is unemployed. And in some places, the percentage is far more.” For the rising young generations to be gainfully employed, 51 million jobs will have to be created by 2020.

## **Diving headfirst into liberalism**

Development is a continuous source of challenges. The trick is how best to solve them. In practice, it all comes down to choosing the right strategy and track for political development. The Arab world has already tested several strategies: In the first half of the twentieth century, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon all experimented with the Western model of democracy and a free market. However, with the help of European colonialism, landowners monopolized the political scene and compromised the entire system. In the 1950s, new people – teachers, lawyers, journalists, engineers and doctors – entered the political scene, as a group of “professional people” mainly employed in the public sector. The tool they used was the army: it attacked and shifted power away from the landed gentry. This new ruling elite enacted land reforms, nationalized industry and trade, and tried to improve the standard of living for the poorest strata.

This system of state socialism, which de facto became a new model for development, was closely linked to Gamal Nasser. At the



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**Citizens in the Arab Middle East are demanding democracy, respect, and dignity**



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time of his death in 1970, Egypt had had widely developed social protection programs, an authoritarian political system, and a totally inefficient economy. Nasser's successors Anwar Sadat (1970–1981) and Hosni Mubarak decided to change the current course of the country and implemented a market economy. They did so cautiously at first, but in the early 21st century Egypt and other countries in the region decided to accelerate growth by diving headfirst into the deep end of economic liberalism. Private capital gained more investment opportunities; social spending was cut. Banks, cement plants, steel mills, and telephone companies were privatized. On a macroeconomic scale, the results were impressive. Egypt began to produce and export more, its budget deficit and current account deficit fell, its foreign exchange reserves surged, and the Egyptian pound gained in value. The Egyptian economy was recognized in 2009 as one of the fastest growing in the world.

### Budgetary rebellion

But if they had it so good, so to speak, then why did people in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria come forward to demand the ouster of the groups that had reformed their once-anachronistic economies?

Those who took their demands to the streets had not benefited or had lost out on this economic liberalization. The poorest strata had neither gained nor lost because they had little to lose. But teachers, state doctors, engineers, manual laborers, civil servants, and even soldiers – all the public sector employees – did lose. It was commonly known that an Egyptian army general earned five times less than an elite graduate of the American University in Cairo working at Citibank. This same general could also not send his children to study at this university due to its high tuition fees. Wages lagged behind inflation. “We are becoming a new proletariat in the era of globalization and economic liberalism,” I was told by the professors I know at the University of Cairo. From this point of view, the events at Tahrir Square were about public-sector employees protesting against their pauperization.

### Crony capitalism

The liberalization of the economy had been done in a way that outraged people. Under the conditions of authoritarianism, privatization gave way to corruption scandals and scams. Privatization tenders were rigged so that members of the political elite or their allies won the deals. Millionaires were born overnight – one

**The “Arab Spring” begun in 2010 brought thousands of demonstrators out onto the streets of Cairo and Alexandria**

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just had to have access to the right people in the right ministry or in the president's office. In this way, public utilities, telecommunications, ports, and the construction industry all went under the hammer. The celebrated Egyptian film industry was sold off for a song. More economic power meant, concurrently, more political power. It was only after the resignation of President Mubarak that the vast flow of state assets into the hands of the so-called cronies became fully apparent. Many of them, like the son of the former president and perhaps the former president himself, will now face trials in court.

### Tired of stagnation

People were tired of seeing the same faces. Several years ago I rode a bus from Sharm el-Sheikh to Cairo. My traveling companion, a man aged about 40 years, drew my attention to the permanence of the political system in his country in an original way. "I was born: Mubarak was president. I finished school: Mubarak was president. I graduated: Mubarak was president. I started working: Mubarak was president. I will probably die, and Mubarak will probably still be president." Similar long-lived governments were also found in Libya, Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. In Egypt, political liberalization was supposed to accompany economic liberalization, but ultimately it did not. In all the Arab countries, even in Saddam Hussein's Iraq, elections were held for all offices of state authority, but the same candidates from the ruling elite always won. The ruling authorities had and still have great opportunities to rig elections, but the main reason the system persists is the lack of an experienced electorate. Most people are susceptible to demagoguery, populism, and the charm of a charismatic leader.

### It's about dignity

Undoubtedly, the main driving forces behind the events in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen are unmet needs. But the demands of liberty and democracy, which brought Tunisians, Egyptians, and Yemenis out into the streets, are not just blanket terms for material needs. Viewing the problem in this light would discredit those who gave their lives in clashes with the authoritarian system's forces. It is telling that Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian street vendor, did not set fire to himself when he was forbidden to sell on the street, and not even



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when the police commandeered his goods. The tragedy occurred when Bouazizi went to the police to try to enforce his rights. There, instead of listening to him, they degraded him. His case was about personal dignity and civil rights.

**As a result of the stormy events in Egypt, the military has taken power**

### What's next?

As a result of the turbulent events in Tunisia and Egypt, the military took over. The army is a powerful political and economic force; it has its own industrial facilities and controls many public utilities. Senior military leaders are shareholders in privatized companies and sit on supervisory boards of economic institutions. In Egypt, including the families, the army is a "corporation" of 5 million people whose members do not want to lose their positions. They are most interested in continuing the policy of economic liberalization, as they stand to benefit from a new wave of privatization. The current battle now being fought is over whether or not the "cronies" from the first wave of privatization will return at least part of the national wealth to the state. Then, there will be more for the new elite to divvy up. Maintaining a liberal economic orientation will also be beneficial for the whole country, as it provides faster growth. But will everyone benefit? If not, then things will come full circle and there will be a new wave of protests.

### Threats

The biggest current threat to the Middle East is populism. The state authorities are weak and will be submissive to street-level demands for pro-social economic policy. This



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the “salt” of such a society. In recent decades there were about 100,000 NGOs in the Middle East, but the authoritarian system still did not collapse. Instead, it became more flexible but remained as repressive as ever. In the Middle East, the West suffered not only a political but also a moral defeat. The West carried the Middle Eastern dictators in its arms (figuratively) and kissed them on the hands (literally). It made money from contracts with dictators and benefitted from their sponsorship. The West ought to return to the moral foundations of Western civilization, as enshrined in such great documents as the Declaration of Human Rights and the American Constitution.

### Dreams of freedom and democracy

A healthy economy and a mature electorate: these two conditions need to be met for the protesting Arabs’ dreams of freedom of democracy to come true. This, however, may take decades. Until that happens, the events in the Middle East in 2011 will remain only a sharp protest against government policy, the revolt of a social class who lost out on the privatization of national assets. For the time being, the real revolution has occurred in society’s mentality. People have ceased to be afraid of showing that they are proud citizens and patriots of their countries. Women have participated in the protests on an equal level with men. These new attitudes evolved slowly, over the whole 20th century. Many sociological studies are showing changes in views about the family model and the position of women in society, the emergence of new patterns of consumption and behavior, growth in consumerism, and a waning religious fervor. The events of 2011 have without a doubt been closely linked to changes in the cultural codes of the Middle Eastern societies, and are therefore related to long-term processes. ■

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#### Further reading:

- Elliott M. (2011). Learn to Love the Revolution. Five Lessons from change in the Arab World. *Time*, March 7, 22-27.
- Global Economic Prospects. Fiscal Headwinds and Recovery. Middle East and North Africa*. Summer 2010, The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, Washington 2010.
- The Struggle over Democracy in the Middle East. Regional Politics and External Policies*, ed. by N.J. Brown and Emad El-Din Shahin, Routledge, London, 2010.

**The real revolution has occurred in the mentality of Arabs: people have ceased to be afraid and are openly expressing their views**

kind of policy, however, instead of providing relief, will slow growth and consequently even exacerbate the development problems. Officials who do not satisfy the demands of the street will be ousted, and those who promise immediate improvement will take their places. Because of this, the economy will continue to plunge. Populism in the Middle East has an Islamic flavor to it, and even though the region has gotten over its infatuation with the Khomeini revolution in Iran any involvement by the Islamic communities in government will certainly mean a lot. Such governments will be anti-liberal, anti-Western, and anti-Israel. This in turn will not ease the implementation of Western policies in the region.

### Same old story

For decades the West has been heavily involved politically, economically, and militarily in the affairs of the Middle East. This is why it is difficult to imagine it giving up on trying to “shape” the region in line with its own interests. The slogan “we should let them [the Arabs] do it [build democracy] themselves” has been appearing in some intellectual circles in the West. Morally it’s justified, but politically it’s naive. Events in the Middle East in 2011 indicate that Western policies have failed there. This strategy relied on the promotion of Arab authoritarian regimes and a belief that, with time, they would become more democratic. And so the West promoted the concepts of civil society, funded grants, research fellowships, and subsidies for development projects, and supported small businesses as