

A Decade After the Arab Spring: The Journey So Far

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Abstract

In 2011 a fisticuff between the police and a street hawker in Tunisia sparked a political revolution called Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East. The revolutions succeeded in ousting some autocratic rulers and failed to sack others. Economic hardship, autocratic style of leadership, thirst for democracy and corruption triggered the uprisings. Arab Spring annihilated over one million people and displaced over ten million others. Proceeding events in immediate and later years of the revolution showed that; the dream of democracy, economic liberation, and freedom that gingered that revolution has not been achieved. The region is worse-off today, and foreign partners that supported the revolution had long ago coiled back to their cocoons and left them in the eye of the storm. The only positive angle to Arab Spring is injection of the spirit of defiance against their autocratic theocracies and military junta.

Key Words: Revolution, Democracy, Economy, Theocracy, Military.

Introduction

In 2010 a ruckus between a street hawker called Mohammed Bouazizi and law enforcers made him set himself ablaze. Bouazizi's unprecedented suicidal action sparked a wave of massive, sudden and decisive protests in all the nooks and crannies of Tunisia. Gargantuan protests in Tunisia triggered similar revolts in many countries of north Africa and the middle east. These popular uprisings birthed by a standoff between a frustrated young Tunisian and law enforcement officer was called Arab Spring.

The Arab Spring drew its name from 1845 movement known as "Peoples Spring", a development that originated in Europe. Since then 'spring' has been attached to uprisings associated with enthronement of democracies globally. The Western media initiated and popularised the usage of the phrase "Arab Spring" while reporting the tumultuous upheavals that rocked the Arab world at the beginning of 2011(Aljazeera, 2020).

Arab Spring succeeded in ousting legendary and chronic totalitarians in Egypt (Hosni Mubarak), Libya(Muammar Gaddafi), Tunisia(Ben Ali), Yemen(Saleh). Some of the toppled dictators have been on the saddle long before most of the protesters were born. The revolution failed to sack totalitarian leaders and theocratic rulers in countries like Bahrain and Syria. Lack of success by revolutionaries in these countries was attributed to external interferences by regional and global state and non state actors that joined the fray because of inordinate reasons. Their unabashed involvement disorganised and balkernised the movements thereby denied them cohesion desirable to achieve their mission of ending eras of totalitarianism (Hubbard and Kirkpatrick, 2021).

Political development that took-off because of Arab Spring degenerated to full blown civil wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen, and some parts of Iraq. These wars have terminated hundreds of thousands of lives, destroyed property worth billions of dollars and displaced millions of people across the region.

Arab Spring was a revolution piloted by economically exploited, politically suppressed, and socially subjugated youths of the Arab world. Little wonder Al-Najma Zidjaly of Oman University labelled the revolution “Youth Quake”. Most of them supported and actively participated in the revolution with the hope of turning the political, social and economic tables upside-up in their countries and the Arab world at large. Arab spring was staged in three different forms:1) peaceful protests that involved sit-ins, strikes, and occupying of public spaces;2) armed insurrection by groups opposed to their country’s leadership; 3) a combination of protests and arms struggle. These strategies succeeded in some climes and fall short in others.

There is hardly unanimity on variables responsible for success or otherwise of such strategy and tactics deployed by leaders of the revolutions in various countries. The question begging for answer is: has the revolution achieve its goal of changing the economic fortunes of its never-say-die vanguards and millions of the people they represented? The consensus is; it was a kind of ‘one step forward, two steps backward’(Mabon, 2021). The gains were insignificant compared to the destruction that the revolution engineered. This paper adopted a qualitative method based on content analysis with reliance on secondary sources of data. This was chosen to enable the authors have access to the diverse documents related to the subject under discourse and as well aid a proper understanding of the issues before, during and after the Arab spring.

Frustration-Aggression Theory – A Framework of Analysis

This research chose Frustration-aggression theory known in other literature as Frustration-aggression hypothesis as a tool that guided the work. This theory was propounded by five American psychologists (Dollard, Doob, Miller, Mowrer, and Sears) in 1939. This theory has been adopted in fields of study like sociology, psychology, criminology, medicine and political science among others(Breuer and Elso,2017).It has been found useful in understanding human as well as animal behaviors since its postulation over eight decades ago. The major thrust of this theory is; frustration breeds aggression and the inability to achieve individual or collective goal is a highway to aggression.

The aggression can be a right or wrong target but one-point worthy of note is that frustration hardly arose from a single incidence, it is usually a product of accumulated failed efforts to achieving goals or changing the situation to desired goal. A good example is the case in focus, youths were frustrated with economic, political and social orders in the Arab world. And all attempts to change the situation through legal avenues were frustrated by their kleptocratic and feudalistic ruling families and their partners in the West and America.

Factors Responsible for the Revolution

A myriad of reasons has been propounded or advanced that were responsible for the development that changed political setting of the Arab world. There were general and particularistic factors, and former and immediate reasons.According to Salam (2015) dictatorial and autocratic disposition of Arab leaders and rulers contributed to the upheavals.



Most of the leaders either assumed their positions through military coups or inherited their positions because of hereditary processes enshrined in feudalistic or theocratic political settings. For example, Gaddafi of Libya, Ben Ali of Tunisia, Saleh of Yemen, Bashar Assad of Syria and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt emerged through coups. Aside them, all other political leadership in the region were either theocratic or feudalistic products.

Because of their manner of emergence, their style of leadership was oppressive, suppressive and full of human rights abuses. Liberties concomitant in democratic systems were non-existent in the entire Arab world. Frustration and hardship associated with their highhandedness encouraged massive support and participation in the revolution when the opportunity knocked on their doors.

Pundits identified corruption and cronyism as another contributing factor to Arab Spring. Mnawar (2015) in his work titled "Corruption and the Arab Spring" expatiated how corruption was raging in multifaceted manners in the entire Arab world. Rulers of these countries used cronyism to perpetuate sundry acts of corruption. Public procurement procedures, contract awards, government welfare packages and entire public life were enmeshed in deep corruption. The resultant repercussion of this pervasive corruption and kleptocratism is the denial of the basic necessities of life to majority of the citizenries. Hospitals, schools and public utilities were non-existent or in horrible shapes. This practically made living hard and shortened life expectancy of ordinary folks in the Arab world.

Hedonistic lifestyle of autocrats and heads of theocratic states in the entire Arab world also contributed to Arab Spring. Leaders of these poor enclaves of the world live a lifestyle that democratically elected leaders of advanced and prosperous country dare try. They own some of the most expensive palaces, biggest cruise ships, most sophisticated private jets etc (Mulderig, 2018). They display this wealth with reckless abandon within and outside their countries. The show of wealth is not restricted to them alone, their immediate family members and political cronies are also not left out. Their kids attend some of the most expensive schools in the world. And wives are the highest patronisers of the most expensive designer products in the world.

While they live such a senseless and insensitive life, a commanding majority of their subjects live in abject poverty. Their level of poverty was beyond imagination and quantification. Slow economic development and growth has also been seen as a propeller of Arab Spring. Corruption, clientism, cronyism, irredentism, kleptocratism and nepotism confluence and froze economic growth and development of countries in the Arab World. That reflected on the economic base of their citizens. Millions of them lived below poverty bar prescribed by World Bank and other global bodies (Luciani, 2015).

Most of these countries, oil is their revenue backbone. Those without oil heavily depended on oil rich countries for financial support and sundry largesse. The tailspin in global oil prices blocked advancing of such grants from sister states in the region and beyond. And those with oil could not meet up due to crumbling of global prices. That shrank growth and development in many countries. Lack of accountability and gross human rights violations barred Western and American investors from injecting monies into these countries. That directly affected economic growth and development in the Arab world.

Absence of growth in the economy limited jobs vacancies for graduates and non graduates to pick. That ballooned unemployment to a level that later constituted a social menace to the society. As a matter of fact, it was the lack of a good paying job that forced





Mohammed Bouazizi a trained engineer to engage in fruits hawking that led to the fracas between him and the police in Tunisia and the resultant self-immolation.

Climate change was a contributing factor to Arab Spring. This point has been specifically linked to the war in Syria. Syria experienced draughts from 2006-2010. The situation led to loss of billions of dollars by small and medium scale farmers. The hardship forced a massive rural-urban migration in Syria. Those that change habitat settled in outskirts of major cities. Their relocation to the cities did not change their economic status much as most of them realized that live in their villages was better than the shanty towns they moved to (Perez, 2013). When upheaval commenced, they saw a golden opportunity to take aim at the system and its actors. They joined the rank of the revolutionaries as a must take gamble and a kind of hail Mary move that may miraculously change their fortunes in life.

Literacy level played a role in sparking the flame of Arab Spring. The Arab world today has a relatively high number of literate youths living within and in diaspora. This made discussions, planning and sundry means that afforded them the opportunity to exchange ideas easier. Education exposed them to other societies and political outstanding progress therein. It gave them the opportunity to know the globally accepted philosophy of democracy and its concomitant array of freedoms and liberties. While staging the real revolution in the streets their education came to bear because they coordinated their activities in a manner that only educated people can. Most of the kingpins of the revolution are graduates from local and foreign colleges with training in all facets of human endeavor (Youssef, 2016). There is no debating the fact that without education, leaders of the revolution would have encountered an uphill task in organising and staging their protests or arms struggles as demonstrated in all the countries that participated in the struggle.

Quest for a democratic political order by millions of people especially youths in the Arab world gingered the popular uprising. Advantages of democratic governments attracted their attentions and made them struggled to have such cherishable systems in their countries. They were exposed to the fact that democratic settings naturally come with accountable, productive, responsive and sensitive leadership. Furthermore, they came face to face with irrefutable cum incontrovertible realism that in democratic societies; both the led and leaders are equal before the law (principle of the rule of law). They became conscious that a functional democracy will end clientism, corruption, nepotism and cronyism that blocked their countries' opportunity to grow. Sequel to that, they believed that sacking their autocrats and kleptocrats will usher a novel dawn of economic development and societal transformation.

Repercussions of Arab Spring

Arab Spring masterminded political, economic, and social changes in the Arab world and beyond. A critical perusal of these changes indicated that the changes were severely apocalyptic. No much recorded positive developments vis-a-vis the mission of the revolution. The quintessential goal of the revolution is leadership change in the Arab world. That informed the popular chanting "ash-shab yurid isqat an-nizam" meaning "The people want the fall of the regime". Arab Spring succeeded in ending regimes in Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya. And failed in Oman, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Iraq, and Bahrain. A simple survey showed that despite the popularity of Arab Spring majority of the rulers in Arab States were not uprooted from power. Most of the feudal or theocratic leaders are still on the throne. Countries that the wind of change could not foster political change in the region are; the

Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Kuwait.

The revolution terminated the reign of autocrats in only three countries viz Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. Succeeding events demonstrated that sacking of such leaders triggered negative developments that world is still grappling with. After sacking of Libyan and Yemenis leaders the countries went into deadly and destructive civil wars that are still raging. These countries became centres of gross human rights violations and allied crimes (Shelton, 2019).

Libya is today a failed state without a central government. The country has been partitioned between factional leaders along with their armed militias. When Muammar Gaddafi was killed with the aid of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), Libya descended into anarchy. Its Arab population embarked on genocide against their fellow black citizens (Ulfstein and Christensen, 2013)

Furthermore, Libya became a slave trading centre. Innocent blacks from West Africans heading to Europe via Libya were kidnapped by armed gangs and sold to Arabs as slaves. Slaves buyers and sellers openly bid for humans who were in cages like bidders of goods on auction. In other cases, some were forced to donate vital organs of their bodies like kidney to their captors (HuffPost, 2017).

In Yemen, the long standing leader was overthrown. But the country descended into a civil war that attracted intervention of external forces. Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates formed a coalition and supported a faction. And Islamic Republic of Iran and her allies supported others. This led to indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets and other non military targets by these forces (Amnesty International, 2020). Yemen has been totally destroyed by activities of internal groups and their allies in the gulf region. Hunger, malnutrition, starvation and diseases are orders of the day. Children and women are dying from preventable diseases in large number (Anadolu News Agency, 2021).

The change in Egypt did not improve the democratic credentials of the country. President Hosni Mubarak was succeeded by Field Marshall Mohammed Hussain Tantawi---a member of the ruling military council under Mubarak (Blair, 2021). The military set a transition timetable that peaked with an election that Dr. Mohammed Morsi of Muslim brotherhood won (Ghanem, 2018). He defeated a retired military officer that was sponsored by forces that the revolution dethroned.

Barely a year into the civilian political setting the military struck again. They sacked a democratically elected government that was a product of sweat and blood of the revolutionaries. They advanced reasons like; President Morsi and his brotherhood team are tinkering with the circular nature of Egypt, incited violence, torture of opposition, and indiscriminate detention of Egyptians (BBC News, 2019). Today Egypt is back to the very setting they sank during the revolution. The leader of the country is a military man who changed from uniform to civilian cloth. Like Mubarak, he also organised charades called elections, just to confer on himself legitimacy within and outside the country (Kirkpatrick, 2014).

Egyptians are still facing arbitrary rule, the press is not free, voices of dissent are being muted by force, terrorists are successfully staging inhuman acts, and the economic base of majority of the citizens is worse than it used to be. Cook (2017) succinctly narrated the nostalgic feelings of Egyptians and how the change they brought is sinking them deeper the drain of poverty, dictatorship, and social fragmentation.



The revolution led to civil wars in the region—especially in Syria. After a few weeks of the struggle, the Syrian uprising took a different dimension; the country went into a civil war. The country was partitioned to different factions that waged and are still waging armed struggles against the regime of Bashar El-Assad. The internal armed groupings have external partners helping them prosecute the war. Some of their external partners or backers are state actors while others are not. The U.S., Saudi Arabia, UAE and some NATO members are backing some factions. Russia, Iran, Hezbollah fighters of Lebanon are backing others. On a separate note, the Jewish State of Israel are participating through aerial bombardment of groups they consider are under Iranian command. Still, Turkey is also in the fray, they are backing anti Assad groups and combating Kurds fighters along their common border with Syria (CSIS, 2021).

Events in Syria went so bad to the level that the regime of Assad used chemical weapons on its people (Krishnan, 2017). Despite glaring evidence of the nasty and illegal act, the Syrian regime denied the actions. Assad's action attracted a reaction from the U.S., but the reaction was too little to yield any impact that will give the groups they are backing battlefield advantage. The airfield runways they rained bombs at were repaired and put to use in a matter of some hours by the Syrian military (NIIR, 2018).

When the world observed that military solution is not possible, political solutions were embarked upon. The UN initiated several peace talks between the government and various rebel groups. A key demand by major groups that Assad must not head any interim government arrangement stalled the talks. Additionally, major battleground victories by Assad through the support of Russia and other partners changed the entire equation. The government developed an unwilling disposition to political solutions (Fisher, 2016).

The revolution gave the Bahrainian theocratic rulers the opportunity to clamp down on protesters – who are mostly from the majority Shia Islamic Sect. The government invited Saudi Arabian forces to help them quell the revolution. Saudi forces used brutal force and committed acts defined as gross crimes under international law. The saddest aspect of the Bahrainian episode is, the rulers of the kingdom striped away citizenship of some of the protesters and their supporters (Fitch and Schwartz, 2016). In addition to aforementioned, the government jailed protesters for very long time. Most were denied the chance to defend themselves in any court of law. Their slamming in jails violated international laws that said protest is a basic human right that every living being is entitled to (Mohammed, 2016).

The most catastrophic effect of the Arab Spring is the rise of ISIS and ISIL in Iraq and parts of Syria. The revolution created ungoverned spaces in Northern Iraq and parts of Syria. Terror groups occupied ungoverned spaces and established an Islamic Caliphate. People under their jurisdiction were subjected to cruelty never seen since the end of Second World War (Hamid, McCants and Dar, 2017).

They beheaded people and recorded the proceedings. After recording they posted them to the outside world. Minority tribes that were ab initio not Muslims were forcefully converted and their women snatched and given to jihadists that left their countries and joined the struggle for the establishment of a new caliphate in the region (Kosh, 2018).

Arab Spring converted the Middle East to a theatre of war between great powers and their proxies. This indirectly provided them the opportunity to physically test their new arsenals, and gave their forces a physical combat situation experience. It was a pure replay of the Cold



War rivalry between Russia (a successor of the Soviet Union) and the U.S. and its NATO and Middle East allies (Chakrabarti, 2017).

Finally, Arab Spring created a big refugee and Internally displaced persons' disaster in the entire region. Almost half of the Syrian population of 20 million people are either refugees or IDPs. The same applies to Iran, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya. This massive movement of persons outside the region triggered problems in European Union zone. The journeys they took were perilous because it was through the sea and the boat used were not equipped for such long voyages (UN News, 2017). Their massive influx overstretched the capacity of host countries to accommodate them in line with internationally agreed standard. It also led to the rise of far right movements that do not want immigrants from such area of the world (Salameh, 2017).

Conclusion

A critical perusal of post Arab Spring events suggest that the revolution did not achieve its goal of ushering positive political and economic changes in the Arab world. The region is worse off today than the time they struggled for the change. The only sign of positivity is sedimentation of the spirit of defiance in the mind of millions of suffering youths. And their capacity to mobilise and square off with autocratic and totalitarian leaders. The youths that sparked the revolution must go back to the drawing board and plot novel ways of influencing political developments and systems in their various countries.

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