

Report

Revolutions in Motion: The Transformations of the Arab World, 2010-2014

*Professor Jack A. Goldstone**

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Peaceful protesters across the Arab world are challenging violent dictators [Reuters]

When asked what he thought of the impact of the French Revolution, during Nixon's visit to China in 1972, Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai is famously said to have responded "It's too early to tell." In fact, he appears to have thought the question was about the French Student Revolution of 1968 only four years earlier.⁽¹⁾ Still, in either event, the caution is wise: for revolutionary upheavals it often takes years, or even decades, to see their outcome.

In France in 1789, the French Revolution at first produced ruinous inflation and state bankruptcy; but a dozen years later Napoleon I emerged as a brilliant leader who led France to conquer all of Europe. In China after 1949, Mao Zedong led the country from one ruinous ideological crusade to another, from the "Great Leap Forward" that produced massive famines to the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" that destroyed generations of human capital in its assault on schools and the educated. By 1980, the GDP of all of China had been reduced to less than half of that of France.⁽²⁾ Yet a generation later, China has become, by some calculations, the largest economy in the world.⁽³⁾

These cases are mentioned to show that no matter how disastrous things appear in the first few years of a revolution, things can turn out quite differently just a few years hence. What matters in shaping the future are whether populations are effectively mobilized, whether a ruthless and disciplined or inclusive and accommodating leadership emerges, and what challenges and opportunities are presented by the global political and economic system. The Arab Revolutions exhibit the full spectrum of changes on these variables, and thus a wide range of outcomes so far.

First, however, it is necessary to be clear that the events of 2010-2014 in North Africa and the Levant are in fact revolutions. Some have argued, in dismay because their hopes for democratic change have been dashed, that these are not revolutions. Such critics claim that nothing has changed – Egypt still has an authoritarian regime led by a former military officer – or that things have gotten worse, or just plunged into chaos, as in Libya and Syria. This may be true at this moment, but that does not mean these events should not be understood as revolutions. (4)

It is in the very nature of revolutions to sometimes bring harsher dictatorships or chaos as their short-term outcomes. The French and Russian revolutions both brought years of vicious civil wars and terror, and many revolutions have produced counter-revolutions and dictatorship; that does not mean they were not revolutionary events. We need to put aside the mythic (and rarely realized) view of revolutions that they mark sudden transitions from one type of political regime to a completely different one. That is often an ideal, distorted by hindsight. Even the American Revolution of 1776, sometimes idealized as a revolution that ushered constitutional democracy into the New World, was a long process. The American colonies fought a nearly decade long war against their British overlords, followed by local disorder and confusion under the Articles of Confederation; the Constitution we revere today was not adopted until 1787, a dozen years after the first shots of revolution were fired at Lexington and Concord. Even then it was a very incomplete revolution, leaving slavery in place and a number of critical issues, such as judicial review to determine the constitutionality of laws, to be resolved in later years.

A typical revolution moves through several stages. It starts with the breakdown of the old regime, which brings an initial honeymoon period of electoral activity and enthusiasm. Yet this is soon followed by a power struggle among the elite factions who remain, sometimes pitting moderate reformers against radicals, and sometimes radicals against counter-revolutionaries. These power struggles frequently generate coups d'état and civil wars. The result of these struggles may be decisive, with radical or conservative groups taking absolute power and seeking to destroy their adversaries. Or they may lead to deadlocks and long drawn-out civil wars – in China, the collapse of the Imperial Regime in 1911 was followed by civil wars lasting up to 1949. In some cases, the elite factions may enter a compromise or agreement and produce an inclusive and more democratic regime; but this outcome only occurs under rather special conditions, which I shall discuss below. (5)

Another major error in discussing the events of 2010-2014 is to mistake revolutionary forces and events for mere “terrorism.” For example in Yemen, the United States government has focused on combatting the Sunni Islamic jihadist group al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and neglected the much broader conditions of state

breakdown and the consequent emergence of rival groups engaged in a struggle for power. The rise of the Shi'ite Houthis – whose banners proclaim "God is Great, Death to America, Death to Israel, Curse on the Jews, Victory to Islam" – as dominant actors able to displace the government in Sanaa thus was not anticipated, and still is somewhat overlooked and misunderstood by American government officials who focused too narrowly on the terrorist threat from AQAP. The same is true in regard to American policy toward the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant; this group too was long dismissed as just another terrorist organization, instead of being recognized for the radical revolutionary state-builders they are. (6)

The events of 2010-2014 in the Arab world thus need to be analyzed in the framework of "Revolutions" – but not as a mythic ideal. Rather, they should be examined in light of the full range of revolutionary processes as we understand them, from state breakdown to power struggles and counter-revolution, to the emergence of dictatorships, chaos, or in rare cases more democratic regimes.

Tunisia presents what looks like a paradox: it has been the most successful revolution, in terms of replacing a corrupt dictatorship with an inclusive democracy; at the same time it has been the least violent of the regime changes that occurred. But there is really no paradox here. What we know from the history of revolutions is that those that involve the least violence, particularly those able to avoid civil or international war, are most likely to produce a stable democratic outcome. (7) Tunisia's revolution was unusual in several ways. First, the army was determined to stand aside from politics, neither acting to support the regime of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali nor intervening after the departure of the dictator to support a particular group or insert itself into power. Second, there was no major counter-revolutionary threat from armed groups. Third, the elites of the various groups who had fought for the revolution – the leadership of the Islamist Party Ennahda, liberal pro-democracy groups, and reformers drawn from the ranks of the old regime -- agreed to work together and voluntarily cede power after losing elections, rather than adopt polarizing positions and seeking to monopolize power.

All of these factors were aided by several background factors unique to Tunisia among the Arab nations. Thanks to long-standing efforts dating back to the rule of Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia had a high level of women's education and female engagement in political and civil society organizations; women continuously led efforts to seek compromise rather than total victory. In part because of the higher education of women, Tunisia also began its demographic transition sooner than other Arab countries, and thus had a lower percentage of youth – particularly youth under 20 – than other Arab societies. We know that more mature societies are generally less volatile than more youthful societies. Finally, Tunisia had better developed civil society institutions –

teachers' unions, lawyers' organizations, other workers' federations – that helped guide and moderate popular agitation throughout the revolution.(8)

There are still problems in Tunisia of course – no great political transformation is likely to occur anywhere without raising significant challenges. However, these challenges – addressing regional inequality, restoring economic strength, and building effective and legitimate governing institutions – should be manageable given continued cooperation among key elites. That cooperation, however, is key – as of this writing the new secular government of Habib Essid has not obtained the support of the three main opposition parties: Ennahda, the Popular Front, and Afek Tounes. If a new government does not emerge from the recent popular elections, Tunisia could be thrown back into instability.

Egypt seems like a straightforward case of revolutionary failure: prior to January 25th, 2011, Egypt was a military dictatorship; in 2015 Egypt is a military dictatorship. Yet it could also have been said of France, that prior to 1789 France was ruled by a Bourbon monarchy, and that in 1814 France was ruled by a Bourbon monarchy. Revolution and counter-revolution, however, lurk in between. The huge difference is in popular mobilization. Prior to 2010, it had been over fifty years, since the Nasser revolution of 1952, since Egyptians had been roused en masse to support a change in government. Then it happened twice in quick succession: in 2011 Egyptians occupied key sites in Cairo, Alexandria, Port Said, and other centers to overturn the dictatorial regime of Hosni Mubarak; and in 2013 they did the same in support of a counter-revolutionary coup that overturned the democratically elected regime of Mohammed Morsi. Morsi, though he became President in the first free and competitive elections in the five-thousand year history of Egypt, and thus represented a truly revolutionary breakthrough, was elected with a slim majority among the Egyptians who came out to vote. He thus had a weak mandate at best. Yet he decided to challenge both the military and all the various factions of the political opposition. This was something that neither the army nor the opposition and their popular supporters would tolerate. Elite polarization led to counter-revolutionary mobilization by the opposition elites, and then to Morsi's quick downfall and his replacement by former Field Marshall Abdel Fatah el-Sisi. Some have therefore concluded that counter-revolution had turned back the clock and it was simply 2010 once more.

Yet the mass mobilization of 2011-2013 cannot so easily be undone. It is not unknown, in the early stages of revolutions, for counter-revolutions to retake power. This was the case in Mexico, for example, a century earlier when in 1913 General Victoriano Huerta drove the democratically elected government of Francisco Madero from power, just two years after Madero and his supporters had driven off the dictator Porfirio Diaz. Yet by July of 1914 Huerta himself gave up power, facing diverse and unmanageable

opposition.⁽⁹⁾ In Egypt, the rule of Sisi looks more solid. But beneath the surface, the potential for mass uprisings remains. Although further protests have been dealt with harshly – up to twenty people may have been killed during recent protests that marked the anniversary of the January 25th revolution – the Muslim Brotherhood has reverted to its underground mobilization, and discontent among those who sought a more democratic and accountable government for Egypt remains high. Moreover, by choosing to rule in an authoritarian manner, wholly excluding and oppressing the liberal and Muslim Brotherhood opposition, Sisi has taken a very different path than the leaders of Tunisia, who sought a broad and inclusive governing coalition. Sisi has encouraged polarization and laid the grounds for further conflict; a pattern that in past revolutions has led to greater radicalization and renewed bursts of mass political activity.

Much depends on whether the Sisi's government is able to deliver on its promises of renewed economic growth. If it can deliver, Sisi may be able to pay his supporters in the military and government, and continue to repress the opposition. Yet if the economy should continue to unravel, and Sisi's resources decline, he could find that his rise was just one cycle in the ongoing story of Egypt's 21st century revolution, a story that could take decades to play out.

In Libya and in Yemen, the other two countries whose leaders were driven from power, and in Syria, civil war rages.⁽¹⁰⁾ Revolutionary civil wars are usually long and brutal; four to ten years is typical. Revolutionary civil wars also usually produce ideological radicalization, with extremists coming to the fore. In all three of these cases, it is sectarian radicals – Islamist militias in Libya and Syria, and Zaidi Shi'ites in Yemen – that have risen to power. Again, this is a familiar dynamic in revolutions. After the old regime has broken down, a struggle for power ensues. In that power struggle, the most ruthless groups often gain a tactical advantage, and the most radical groups often are best able to win popular support. This is because in conditions of state breakdown and anarchy, people above all else want to be with a group that can protect them. In many cases, it is the most ruthless and ideologically committed radical groups who can do that.⁽¹¹⁾ The civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria are thus unlikely to end soon, and in the meantime provide fertile ground for increasingly radical movements to take root and grow. It may be years before these conflicts wind down, especially when foreign powers – Russia, the U.S., Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran – are all engaged in backing one side or another to protect their own goals.

The phenomena of the Islamic State is best understood in this fashion – as the outgrowth of a revolutionary situation and the building of a new, radical, revolutionary state. Given the collapse of authority in eastern Syria and western Iraq in the wake of rebellions against increasingly corrupt and sectarian regimes (Alawite in Syria, Shi'a in Iraq), a space opened for various groups to seek popular support for an alternative

authority. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, as perhaps the most ruthless and ideologically disciplined such group, took a leading role and chose to develop a local administration, creating the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant. The leadership of the Islamic State used an old tactic, familiar from the French, Russian and Chinese Revolutions – namely a “reign of terror”—to assert its authority over a substantial region.

The Islamic State is not just another terrorist organization, however. It has recruited skilled experts from the former Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein and has embarked on a program of state-building. It has sought and gained recruits from Sunni communities throughout Europe and North Africa, acquired arms and money, and organized effective military forces. It has a persuasive revolutionary ideology, claiming to be fighting to restore dignity and power to all Sunnis who have been repressed by infidel western powers and heretic Shi'a regimes, and aiming to create a more just and prosperous world for Sunni Muslims by overturning both Shi'a regimes and the false dictators supported by those western powers.

Hopes that the Islamic State will be quickly overthrown are likely to prove false, for throughout history revolutionary regimes have been underestimated by their opponents. Saddam Hussein thought he could crush the incipient Islamic Republic in Iran, only to be thrown back; both Russians and Americans thought they could destroy the Taliban in Afghanistan, only to admit their inability to do so after decades of fighting. Today, the countries claiming to oppose the Islamic State cannot even agree on a strategy to fight it: Turkey and Saudi Arabia will only join the U.S. forces in combat if their final aim is to overthrow the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad; Iran will only join in that combat if Assad's continued rule is assured. Saudi Arabia's strategy of building a wall between itself and the portion of Iraq controlled by the Islamic State is as likely to protect the Islamic State as the Saudis. The Islamic State may lose some battles, as for Kobani or other cities. Yet it is likely to endure if it can play upon the divisions of its opponents. It seems that one unexpected legacy of the Arab Revolutions will be a new radical revolutionary state in the very heart of the Middle East.⁽¹²⁾

Another unexpected reversal, and perhaps the greatest irony, is that the state that has gained the most from the Arab Revolutions is not an Arab state at all, but the Islamic Republic of Iran. In 2011, it seemed that Iran would be isolated and ignored. After all, Iran had crushed its own populist uprising of 2009, while in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and elsewhere it seemed that the peoples of the Arab nations were seizing liberty and overturning their long-standing dictatorships. Yet as the initial revolutionary honeymoons passed, and these nations sank into the frenzy of counter-revolution and civil wars, it was Iran who was best positioned to take advantage of the breakdown of order. Today, allies of Iran control the core of Syria, the capital of Yemen, and the remainder of Iraq, while their Hezbollah allies play a major role in Lebanon. Meanwhile,

Iran's major adversaries, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, find themselves increasingly unable to project influence, and beset by internal conflicts.

So perhaps the only certainty about revolutions is that whatever the situation may appear in the first year or two of the revolutionary process, it is likely to be quite different a few years hence. The Arab Revolutions still are in the midst of the revolutionary struggles; we may expect further unexpected changes in direction and shifting outcomes in the years ahead. All we can be certain of is that it is beyond the ability of any single power – foreign or domestic – to control the future course of the region. As with most revolutions, the struggles unleashed will continue for years, and perhaps decades.

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***Professor Jack A. Goldstone** is a Woodrow Wilson Center Visiting Scholar and the Director, of the Research Laboratory on Political Demography and Social Macrodynamics.

Endnotes

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