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Comparing the Arab Revolts

THE LESSONS OF 1989

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Since it began, the “Arab Spring” has been subject to a proliferation of comparisons with 1989, and rightly so.¹ Two decades after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, we have learned a great deal about regime transitions—lessons that can improve our understanding of events in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) today. Unfortunately, the comparison does not make one optimistic about democracy’s near-term prospects there. The similarities and differences with 1989 suggest that more autocrats will hang on in 2011, and that those countries which do witness authoritarian collapse will be less likely to democratize than their European counterparts were.

Both 1989 and 2011 caught regional experts completely off guard, as protest and crisis spread across regimes that almost all observers had seen as exceptionally stable. In 1989, Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalization in the USSR and the fall of communism in Poland inspired previously quiescent populations and moribund oppositions to take to the streets and demand change in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Bulgaria, and finally Romania. Such unprecedented mobilizations in turn terrified incumbents into making extraordinary concessions. Change in the MENA region came even more suddenly after the self-immolation of a lone Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, in late 2010 sparked nationwide protests that eventually affected almost all countries from Morocco to Iran.

The events of 1989 and 2011 provide stark examples of how the mere sight of change in one country can have an explosive impact on seemingly stable autocracies nearby. Since the inner workings of nondemocratic regimes are hidden, it is often difficult for outsiders to assess their real strength. Dramatic examples of regime change next door may

(rightly or wrongly) convince activists that regimes they once thought invincible are in fact quite vulnerable and motivate people to take to the streets.

The demonstration effect of transitions nearby also offers oppositions new strategies and symbols for mobilizing support.² Thus, Bouazizi's extreme expression of discontent in Tunisia inspired self-immolations in nearby Algeria, Egypt, and Mauritania. As a result, the contagion of regime crisis can spread to countries where populations have long been quiescent and where domestic conditions may not have been conducive to protest.

Comparison of these two sets of cases, however, also suggests the limits of diffusion alone as a force for regime change. The changes in Europe in 1989 proved so deep and long-lasting because diffusion was backed up by a basic transformation in the regional balance of power and the sudden elimination of a key source of communist stability. Gorbachev's decision to end the Soviet Union's extensive backing of communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe created qualitatively new challenges to authoritarian survival in the region. Like their Central and East European counterparts in 1989, many Arab autocrats now face unprecedented unrest at home. Yet many if not most Middle Eastern autocracies retain the coercive and diplomatic resources that have kept their regimes in place for so long. Elements of the external environment that have bolstered these regimes for generations (for example, U.S. financial support and the Arab-Israeli conflict) have changed little.

The upshot is that 2011 in the Middle East is not 1989 in Eastern Europe. The Arab autocracies of today enjoy better survival prospects than did the communist autocracies of yesterday. Indeed, the contradictory results of the Arab spring so far—including authoritarian retrenchment in Bahrain, massive repression in Syria, and instability in Libya and Yemen—illustrate the paradoxical influence of diffusion in the absence of other structural changes. As long as the structural underpinnings of authoritarianism remain, diffusion is unlikely to result in democratization.

At the same time, the character of diffusion in the Arab world may ultimately be more conducive to authoritarian retrenchment than was the case in Europe two decades ago. In 1989, demonstration effects all pointed to the dangers of hard-line repression. It was lost on no one that the sole East European autocrat to hold out against any reform, Romania's Nicolae Ceaușescu, fell to a military coup, was shot on Christmas Day, and had his body displayed on television—a very public lesson to other heads of one-party regimes trying to decide whether to liberalize or hang onto power at all costs. Indeed, after witnessing these events during a visit to Romania, Julius Nyerere, the leader of Tanzania's single-party regime, decided to initiate a transition to multiparty rule. As he told a journalist, "When you see your neighbour being shaved, you

should wet your beard. Otherwise you could get a rough shave.”³ In contrast to Eastern Europe, the MENA region so far has been host to a larger number of autocrats who have shown that popular demands for regime change can be put down with force. At the same time, the trial of former Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak may convince other autocrats that yielding power is more likely to result in a “rough shave” than holding on at all costs.

Why Autocrats Fall

Yet as Ceaușescu’s example shows, authoritarian survival is determined by more than just the desire of autocrats to hold on. More often than not, autocrats let go of power not because they want to, but because key political, economic, and military allies force them to give up after deciding that the regime is no longer worth supporting. The readiness of elites to back the regime in a crisis is generally more decisive to authoritarian survival than the number of protesters in the streets. Thus Tunisia’s President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali was forced out of the country by angry crowds of thousands which, though sizeable by Tunisian standards, were hardly large enough to overwhelm the military and police. By contrast, the rulers of the Islamic Republic of Iran withstood protests by hundreds of thousands over six months following a fraudulent election in June 2009. Indeed, leaders who can keep the support of crucial elites are likely to survive even severe crises. From 1989 through 1991, communist regimes whose elites remained cohesive were able to survive significant mass protests (China) and severe economic downturns (Cuba, North Korea).

What makes regime elites in some countries willing to hold on in the face of crisis while in other cases they quickly run for the exits? Today, students of authoritarian durability focus largely on the importance of institutionalized elite access to power and patronage.⁴ Those authoritarian regimes that provide stable mechanisms to regulate leaders’ access to material goods—especially through political parties—lengthen time horizons and create incentives for long-term loyalty to the existing regime. According to this argument, allies will remain loyal as long as the regime has the capacity to pay them off.

Yet the sudden communist collapse of 1989, like the fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak more recently, shows that even the most extensive and well-established patronage-based regimes are vulnerable to sudden collapse and mass defections. In Tunisia and Egypt, high unemployment and exorbitant food prices fed mass-level discontent; yet the regimes benefited from positive economic growth in 2010, had plenty of money to pay their police personnel and soldiers, and felt no shortage of patronage to hand out to top civilian and security officials.

Indeed, strictly material incentives offer a weak source of cohesion

for regimes in crisis.⁵ If the crisis makes those near the top of the regime doubt that it will still exist in a year, they may calculate that they will have less to lose and more to gain by joining the opposition. As Steven Levitsky and I have argued, the most robust authoritarian regimes are those that augment patronage with nonmaterial ties. These ties bolster trust within the elite during times of crisis and make it more costly for high-level allies to defect. Nonmaterial connections include shared ethnicity or ideology in a context of deep ethnic or ideological cleavage.

The strongest and most enduring bonds, however, may be the ones forged amid armed revolutionary struggle. As Samuel P. Huntington noted a generation ago, revolutions are “history’s most expeditious means of producing fraternity.”⁶ Further, revolutionary struggle is often accompanied by strong partisan ties and the sense of a “higher cause” that may motivate leaders to hold on even if the regime looks vulnerable and patronage is threatened.

Finally, and perhaps most important, revolutionary struggle frequently creates strong ties between the political rulers and the security forces. Having emerged out of the revolutionary struggle, security forces are often deeply committed to the survival of the regime and infused with the ruling ideology—all of which enhances discipline. Violent revolutionary struggle tends to produce a generation of leaders with the “stomach” for violent repression.

The existence or absence of a recent revolutionary struggle largely explains which communist regimes survived 1989 and which did not. The ones that outlasted the end of the Cold War—China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, Vietnam—were all led by veterans of revolutionary struggles.⁷ Regime survival was particularly striking in China, which faced massive protests in 1989, and Cuba and North Korea, which suffered severe economic decline in the early 1990s when Soviet aid disappeared. By contrast, most East European communist regimes did not emerge out of a prolonged violent struggle and collapsed despite maintaining the kind of institutionalized ruling-party structures that are said to foster authoritarian stability. Similarly, in Yugoslavia and the USSR, where the revolutionary generation had mostly died off by 1989, rulers lacked an *esprit de corps* strong enough to withstand serious challenges. As in Tunisia and Egypt, there was little to hold these regimes together in the event of a crisis.

Iran, grounded in revolutionary struggle, is perhaps the MENA region’s most robust regime. Among other legacies, the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88 helped to generate ideologically motivated and effective security forces including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and its paramilitary auxiliary, the Basij, which is considered “one of the Islamic regime’s primary guarantors of domestic security.”⁸ The strength and motivation of these forces may

explain why the Iranian regime has survived years of international isolation as well as the massive 2009 protests, which were about as large and sustained as those we have seen more recently in Egypt, and much more extensive than those in Tunisia.

Other countries in the Middle East lack such a revolutionary tradition but possess other nonmaterial ties that bolster cohesion during crisis. In Bahrain and Syria, the regimes rely on the intense support of minority groups. In Bahrain, many in the Sunni minority view the Sunni monarchy as key to defending their interests from the Shia majority. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's chief weapon against dissent has been a military and intelligence establishment controlled by his fellow Alawites, members of a religious minority that forms about a tenth of the population. Minority backing is not an absolute guarantee against collapse: Protests may grow too large for even a cohesive military to handle, or things may get so bad that minorities abandon their former patrons. On the whole, however, minority backing provides a potentially critical source of high-level cohesion that other regimes lack.

In still other cases, such as that of Libya, autocrats have relied on family ties. In such "sultanistic" regimes,⁹ the ruler's sons, brothers, and in-laws control the country's main economic and administrative resources. Autocrats in these cases consciously weaken the state, both by filling it with cronies picked more for loyalty than competence and by starving those parts of it not controlled by close allies. Thus in Libya, Muammar Qadhafi severely underfunded the military while ensuring that his sons commanded the most highly trained and best-equipped militias.¹⁰ Such family ties gave the regime a reliable, if small, base of support in the security forces. In contrast to Tunisia and Egypt, where professionalized militaries drove Ben Ali and Mubarak out, the army in Libya was too poor and weak to force Qadhafi from power. Qadhafi was able to rely on the unswerving support from his militias in the face of international isolation and five months of NATO bombing. At the same time, gutting the state and relying on cronies created its own problems. By weakening the state, Qadhafi made his regime vulnerable to the kind of sudden breakdown in social order that left eastern Libya under the control of an inchoate opposition in early 2011. Such weakness, together with NATO attacks, forced the regime to its knees in August.

Why Democratization Succeeds

But even when opposition does succeed in ousting dictators, democracy is far from guaranteed. In mid-2011, autocrats in much of the Middle East were on the defensive, promising reforms that eight months ago would have seemed unimaginable. After Mubarak fell, for instance, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) made signifi-

cant concessions that included putting Egypt's former president on trial. "[T]he generals," one report notes, "seem anxious to please the crowd, fearful, perhaps, that they may become the next target."¹¹ In a similar

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fashion, ex-communists throughout the former Soviet Union reacted to the failure of the August 1991 hardliners' coup by abolishing the Communist Party and proclaiming their support for democratic change. Russia's President Boris Yeltsin promised to fundamentally reform the KGB. Yet in the absence of a well-entrenched civil society, social pressures that had stimulated political reform proved unsustainable over

the medium term. Unchecked by any well-organized liberal opposition, autocrats throughout the former Soviet Union rapidly regrouped after the initial shock of transition. Yeltsin changed his mind and kept many of the old KGB structures in place. Today, free media and competitive elections that had once seemed irreversible are no more than a distant memory.

Such rapid retrenchment is made easier by the fact the most people have short memories. In the early 1990s, public opinion throughout the former Soviet Union was seized by hatred of communism, which citizens associated with empty shelves, shoddy products, and geriatric leaders. A few years of economic collapse and hyperinflation changed all that, turning the communist era into something remembered much more fondly as a time of stable expectations, guaranteed benefits, and global power. Such nostalgia has been one source of support for Vladimir Putin in Russia. In Moldova, such feelings helped to bring the Communist Party back to power in 2001. In Poland and Hungary, ex-communists were able to win elections just a few years after communism's fall.

In countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, it is almost inevitable that within a few years—if not sooner—the old regime will look a lot better to a lot of people. There is scant reason to think that new leaders will have an easier time solving the problems of corruption, inflation, and unemployment that helped to spark the protests. Further, Egypt's transition has already brought renewed sectarian strife and increased crime that may be blamed on regime change. As in much of the former Soviet Union, democracy is likely to be seen by many as synonymous with chaos.

None of this means, however, that democratization is doomed to fail. Since 1989, all the countries of Central Europe and even most of those in the Balkans have become democratic. The resurgence of ex-commun-

ists in Hungary and Poland did not kill democracy there. What made the difference in these countries?

Based on the postcommunist experience, there are a few things that we now know are *less* important. First, constitutional design matters little. Many scholars have argued that emerging democracies with stronger legislatures were more likely to survive than those with powerful presidencies.¹² Yet the postcommunist experience suggests that a strong presidency was as much the result of authoritarianism as its cause.¹³ Russia and Belarus acquired their “superpresidential” regimes in 1993 and 1996, respectively—*after* autocrats had already violently disbanded each country’s parliament. Generally, the degree of presidentialism correlated very highly with a country’s distance from Western Europe—the farther away, the greater the likelihood of authoritarianism and strong presidents rather than democracy and weaker presidents. Finally, there is little evidence that the formal powers of legislatures played a role in East European democratization.¹⁴ Constitutional rules were widely ignored throughout the region. For example, both Serbia’s Slobodan Milošević and Slovakia’s Vladimír Mečiar were far more powerful than their countries’ laws dictated; and their ousters by democratic forces had almost nothing to do with any formal legislative powers.

Next, the postcommunist experience suggests that we should pay less attention to proximate factors such as the mode of transition. Initially, many thought that democracy’s success would hinge on whether opposition and incumbents made transitional “pacts” to ensure long-term democratic stability. Indeed, pacts played an important role in facilitating stable transitions in a few cases in Latin America such as those of Venezuela and Colombia in 1958. Yet the postcommunist experience reminds us that—more often than not—agreements made amid the chaos of the transition have little staying power. When Poland’s Solidarity, for instance, won virtually all competitively elected parliamentary seats in the June 1989 elections, an agreement that guaranteed the Communist Party a legislative majority suddenly went out the window. Indeed, democratization occurred both in East European countries that experienced pacted transitions (Hungary and Poland) and in those that did not (the Czech Republic and Romania).

With the passage of twenty years, it has become clear that democratization prevailed across Central and Eastern Europe thanks mainly to long-range structural factors. First, the level of economic development seems to have been important. Of the ten richest postcommunist countries in 1990,¹⁵ Russia is the only one where democracy failed to take root—an exception explained in part by Russia’s heavy dependence on natural-resource wealth, a dependence that is widely considered to promote authoritarianism. But the single most important factor facilitating democratization was the strength of ties to the West. While relatively developed countries like the Czech Republic and Hungary would likely

have democratized even absent the European Union, the EU played a central role in other parts of Europe such as Albania, Romania, and Serbia, where domestic conditions (underdevelopment or severe ethnic tensions) were unfavorable to democratic development.

Indeed, with the possible exception of Mongolia, the only stable democracies that emerged after 1989 were those that were offered full membership in the European Union. The EU is unique among regional organizations in its long-term commitment to democracy as a condition of membership. In the 1990s, EU membership came to be seen as synonymous with prosperity, and enlargement became “one of the most important variables of political life.”¹⁶ In countries such as Macedonia, Romania, and Slovakia, extensive engagement by European and U.S. actors was key to discouraging authoritarian abuses and promoting a vibrant independent media as well as prodemocratic nongovernmental organizations.

An Unfavorable Environment

It hardly needs stating that the external environment in the Middle East and North Africa is not conducive to democracy. There is obviously no equivalent to the European Union and the region’s relations to the West are, to put it mildly, rather fraught. Further, both the threat of radical Islamism and key Western energy interests in the area will continue to make it tempting for Western actors to support non-Islamist authoritarian forces for some time to come. Such factors by themselves do not doom democratic development, but they do suggest that, in stark contrast to Central and Eastern Europe, democratization in the Middle East and North Africa will hinge almost entirely on each country’s domestic balance of power between pro- and anti-democratic forces.

In both Tunisia and Egypt, there are reasons for optimism. In proportion to its size, Tunisia has the Arab world’s largest middle class and, historically, its strongest labor movement. Egypt also possesses a relatively well-organized opposition, albeit in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood. In both cases, leaders of the revolutions included many relatively young and secular democratic forces that were in many ways similar to the forces that emerged during the “color revolutions” of the early 2000s in Serbia, Georgia, and Ukraine.

Nevertheless, the democratic forces in both Tunisia and Egypt are remarkably weak. Early in 2011, secular and democratic leaders benefited from pent-up frustration with the status quo but were never unified. They also lack well-established organizations capable of penetrating society and mobilizing consistent political support. In many cases, leaders command organizations that have existed for just months or weeks. As a result, secular oppositionists in Egypt and Tunisia pushed to delay elections.

Most critically, as of mid-2011 power in each country remained in the hands of holdovers from the old regime. In Tunisia, veterans of the old order continued to dominate the transitional government. In Egypt, the military was still very much in charge. As Jason Brownlee notes, after Mubarak fell, “the country’s generals . . . did not return to the barracks, repeal the Emergency Law (a core aim of January 25th organizers), or transfer executive power to a civilian-led transitional committee.”¹⁷ Indeed, the SCAF, its occasional responsiveness to opposition criticism notwithstanding, continued to censor the media and put severe restrictions on protest. The fact that democratic prospects hinge on the magnanimity of longtime authoritarians is troubling to say the least.

At the same time, in both Tunisia and Egypt the best-organized social forces are rooted in traditions of radical Islam and have an uncertain commitment to liberal democracy. In Tunisia, the recently legalized Islamist formation known as Hizb al-Nahda (Renaissance Party) is by far the most highly organized, extensive, and experienced political force in the country. Although al-Nahda bills itself as a moderate Islamic grouping in the mold of Turkey’s Justice and Development Party, some fear that its victory in elections might lead to the birth of an undemocratic Islamist government.¹⁸ Still others argue that intransigent secular reactions to al-Nahda promote polarization that will undermine the establishment of a stable democratic order.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood, which at first did not support protests in January, has now replaced the secular youth as the driving force of change in the country. The young people who filled Cairo’s Tahrir Square may know how to use Facebook, but the Brotherhood has a branch in every neighborhood and town. In March, it used religious appeals to urge voters to approve a referendum on early elections that passed overwhelmingly despite strong opposition from newer democratic forces. The Brotherhood is itself facing internal divisions and has so far refrained from seeking executive power. Nevertheless, its dominance—as well as the emergence of more radical Islamic forces such as the Salafists—could threaten democratic development. This is especially true if Islamists secure an alliance with the military—an outcome that some fear has already occurred.¹⁹

Finally, the prospects for democracy are dimmest in Libya. Here, the central challenge is not just the potential dominance of old-regime elites or a civil society weakened by 42 years of quasi-totalitarian rule, but the difficulties that leaders will have in establishing *any* kind of political order—democratic or authoritarian.

In both 1989 and 2011, the world witnessed the surprising vulnerability of many ostensibly stable and entrenched authoritarian regimes. These events have taught us that, just because an autocracy has persisted for many years, we cannot assume that it will remain stable in the face of serious opposition. In order to better understand the potential for authori-

tarian instability, we must look at what forces hold authoritarian elites together. Those regimes rooted in recent revolutionary struggle often survive even the most severe economic crises or opposition challenges, as did China's rulers in 1989 and Cuba's and North Korea's in the early 1990s. For this reason, Iran may be the most robust authoritarian regime in the MENA region today. By contrast, regimes that lack nonmaterial sources of cohesion are likely to be vulnerable if a strong opposition challenge emerges. At the same time, as we saw in the former Soviet Union, authoritarian collapse hardly guarantees democracy. Given the continued dominance of old-regime actors, the weakness of democratic forces, and the current international environment, some form of authoritarianism is likely to dominate the Middle East and North Africa for a long time to come.

NOTES

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3. Quoted in Colleen Lowe Morna, "Tanzania: Nyerere's Turnabout," *Africa Report*, September–October 1990, 24.

4. See especially Barbara Geddes, "What Do We Know About Democratization after Twenty Years?" *Annual Review of Political Science* 2 (1999): 115–44; Beatriz Magaloni, "Credible Power-Sharing and the Longevity of Authoritarian Rule," *Comparative Political Studies* 41 (April 2008): 715–41; and Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, "How Tyrants Endure," *New York Times*, 9 June 2011.

5. Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism: Hybrid Regimes After the Cold War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), 311.

7. The one exception to this pattern is Albania, where—despite continued dominance by veterans of armed struggle—the regime collapsed in 1991, largely due to extreme state weakness.

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11. Richard F. Worth, "Egypt's Next Crisis," *New York Times*, 27 May 2011.
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14. Levitsky and Way, *Competitive Authoritarianism*, ch. 6.
15. Measured in GDP per capita current dollars. Data from World Bank World Development Indicators at www.worldbank.org. Includes countries that were not independent as of 1990.
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