

## **THE CONTESTATION PROCESS OF THE ARAB SPRING**

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On June 30, 2012, Mohammed Morsi assumed the office of the Presidency of Egypt, after Egyptians went to the polls to vote for a president to succeed ousted long-time leader Hosni Mubarak, seventeen months after the so-called Day or Revolt of January 25, 2011 when multiple protests took place in various Egyptian cities including the iconic gathering at Cairo's Tahrir Square. That was in turn sparked by the regional wave of protests that came to be known as the Arab Spring that were instigated by Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in Tunisia on December 17, 2010 and the massive protests that erupted in that country a day later.

In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the international community has struggled with the task of identifying the unifying themes of the New Middle East and North Africa as the region has been reshaped by the multiple events which took Western observers by surprise. Partly to blame for this difficulty is the legacy of regarding the region as a cohesive monolith of enduring political institutions, a characterization that has in turn been transposed to an explanation of the Arab Spring.

A cursory overview of the reigns of leaders deposed during the Arab Spring justifies the lingering image of constancy and uniformity of authoritarian rule in the region. In Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had been in power since 1987. Similarly, Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt since 1981, while in Yemen, Ali Abdullah Saleh served as President of the Yemen Arab Republic in North Yemen since 1978 and continued his reign upon the unification of North and South Yemen in 1990. Muammar Gaddafi enjoyed an even longer hold on power in Libya, having assumed control with the coup d'état of 1969.

The primary challenge for the region is whether such diverse political movements can produce new political actors to form new institutions and deliver on the euphoric expectations resulting from the transformative events of the Arab Spring. The possibility of the power vacuum to be filled by an authoritarian backlash rather than the desired wave of democratization in the region is a credible concern. This uncertainty can shape external perceptions of the region's new direction, especially on the part of Israel and its ability to maintain stability in the region.

The sociopolitical developments that resulted from the Arab Spring represent a number of analytical challenges regarding notions of sovereignty and national identity. At the same time, the transformative

aspect of the Arab Spring has led to an upheaval of long-standing notions of elite-public relations. One of the most studied aspects of the events of the Arab Spring is the emergence of new coordinating mechanisms in social movements such as the usage of social media and social networking. These communication instruments facilitated the creation, dissemination and use of images and symbols of opposition as challenges to the existing institutional configuration, providing the means for members of otherwise marginalized groups to coalesce into mass movements.

The contestation at the core of the Arab Spring challenged the very nature of internal and external legitimacy of long-standing regimes characterized by the stability that came as a by-product of authoritarianism. The political sector became the site of contestation not only at the national level but also at the regional level as a result of the epidemiological diffusion process that produced contagion from one national setting to the next. However, this was not restricted to the political sector as transformations extended beyond the merely political into the societal sector; in other words, identity – in addition to sovereignty – was also subjected to the process of contestation. The sociopolitical upheaval of the region and the removal of the oppressive capacity of authoritarian regimes allowed the redefinition of identities. Sovereignty is directly contested with respect to the survival of a given regime, while identity is in itself a representation of a given configuration of society over alternative ones.

The uncertainty that has lingered since the beginning of the process is related to both sovereignty and identity. The new state of affairs will have a profound impact on long-term processes of identity formation and development. The question that remains with respect to emerging regimes is whether they will be granted internal legitimacy by the same social forces that delegitimized and ultimately led to the demise of the previous regimes and external legitimacy by the international community which has by and large – either implicitly or explicitly – supported the successful challenge to the pre-existing political order. The establishment of democratic institutions may give rise to Islamist forces such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt which – once in power – may sanction a particular form of Islamist identity that runs counter to the Arab Spring discourse or even to that imposed by the Mubarak regime. Or, in the case of Libya, tribal factionalism may pit a number of distinct social identities against each other.

The Arab Spring has resulted in elite reconfiguration in localized settings by divesting entrenched elites of power, while new elites have emerged, often as a direct result of the contestation process. When elites emerge from the public in the short-term, notions of actor and audience are conflated and difficult to disassociate. Mass movement mobilization offers alternative discourses of security and threat. Furthermore, these

discourses are linked to the contestation of internal legitimacy of the state, given the relationship between the entrenched political elite and the ruling regime, especially in cases of authoritarianism. Therefore, the rejection of past political institutions and power practices becomes a rejection of a specific elite configuration and the contestation of the former is connected to the contestation of the latter. The contestation actions of domestic actors, while primarily addressed towards national constituencies, were observed, adopted and enacted by a regional audience through the aforementioned process of diffusion. The existence of multiple and overlapping audiences was amplified and the diffusion process facilitated by the range of social media utilized by these actors so effectively not just in terms of the nature of the action but also as networking and disseminating tools. However, care must be taken not to overemphasize the regional aspect, thereby neglecting each national context and presenting a deterministic model for the region devoid of national differentiation. Such an approach would perpetuate the fallacy of depicting the region as a monolith.