

The Autumn of the Patriarchs

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Two revolutions and two presidents deposed within a few weeks. Long presented as a region resistant to democratization and change, the Arab world has been shaken by the winds of rebellion, which could put an end to the myth of an Arab “authoritarian exception.”

In his last film, *Is This Chaos?*,¹ the Egyptian filmmaker Youssef Chahine described a Cairo neighborhood that rose up against the tyranny and brutality of a police chief who had been terrorizing the people, shaking down merchants, and torturing prisoners at the police station. Hatem, the corrupt policeman, represented the Arab autocrat, whose legitimacy rests solely on violence and who is arrogant toward the weak and obsequious to the powerful. “Anyone who does not like Hatem does not like Egypt,” this petty tyrant says to a merchant who refuses to pay protection money and to a young man who objects to his ways. The end of the film prefigured the Egyptian revolt of January 25, 2011: the people of the neighborhood rose up against the absolute power of the chief of police and besieged his headquarters to demand his ouster and prosecution.

In this prescient film, Chahine offered an acerbic account of the dysfunctions of the Egyptian regime that would ultimately lead to popular uprising and revolution: corruption, repression, and absolutism. A few years after the film came out, the rebellion that Chahine had imagined became a reality. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators occupied Tahrir Square in the heart of the Egyptian capital to demand the departure of President Hosni Mubarak.

¹ For reasons of health, Youssef Chahine codirected this film with his assistant, Khaled Youssef. Chahine died in July 2008, a few months after the film came out.

In a kind of domino effect, the popular uprising in Egypt was spurred and encouraged by the success of the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia, which in a few weeks succeeded in toppling the authoritarian regime of President Ben Ali. Worried by the spreading winds of revolution, a number of Arab heads of state approved political and economic measures intended to calm spirits and head off trouble in their countries. For instance, King Abdullah in Jordan dismissed his prime minister. In Yemen, President Ali Abdallah Saleh, in power for 32 years, announced that he would not seek re-election, while in Algeria, Morocco, and Libya, steps were made to improve the economic well-being of the lower classes. But despite these measures, the threat of contagion remains, and with it signs of an end to the Arab authoritarian exception.

Resistance to Democracy

In the early 1990s, a wave of democratization rolled over the world,² resulting in the collapse of several regimes, especially in Eastern Europe and Latin America, and their replacement by democratic governments. The Arab world was untouched, however, constituting an “authoritarian exception,”³ which gave rise to an abundant literature on the reasons for this resistance. A number of factors were proposed to explain the strong resilience of authoritarianism and the obstacles to the emergence of democracy in the region.

Some models stressed the role of traditional social structures in fostering and reinforcing authoritarian rule in the Arab world. For example, the Palestinian intellectual Hisham Sharabi wrote a celebrated essay in which he tried to show that relations of authority and domination are firmly rooted in Arab political culture.⁴ In his view, the relationship between states and individuals in Arab societies is modeled on the family, with a repressive and authoritarian father in charge, domineering but still essential, while his children live in a situation of dependence. According to Sharabi, the region’s neo-patriarchal political culture gives rise to personal rule

² Samuel Huntington used the phrase “third wave of democratization” to describe the period 1974-1991, which saw democratic transitions in more than thirty countries in Europe, Asia, and Latin America. See Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. University of Oklahoma Press, 1992.

³ Michel Camau “*Globalisation démocratique et exception autoritaire arabe*,” *Critique internationale* 1/2006 (n° 30), pp. 59-81.

⁴ Hisham Sharabi. *Neopatriarchy: A theory of distorted change in arab society*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1988.

together with various mechanisms of mediation and patronage, which maintain the equilibrium of the system and ensure its persistence.⁵

Another theoretical model to explain Arab authoritarianism is due to the anthropologist Abdellah Hammoudi.⁶ Drawing on the example of Morocco, Hammoudi takes the relationship between master and disciple in mystical sects as a paradigm for relations of domination and submission in the Arab political sphere. The disciple suppresses his individuality and allows himself to be totally subordinated by the spiritual power and prestige of his master. Similarly, the Arab citizen renounces his liberty and individuality and submits to the tutelary authority of the political leader.

Other analyses focus on the control of economic resources by Arab regimes for the purpose of bolstering their domination and reducing citizens to a situation of dependence and submission. Thus, some states, especially in the Gulf, “buy” social and political peace by redistributing the rents on the natural resources with which they are endowed. These “rentier states”⁷ are able to do without taxes, thereby diminishing democratic aspirations that arise when the payment of taxes leads to demands for a voice in policymaking. The “founding myth” of democracy, “No taxation without representation,” is thus rendered meaningless in states where the tax burden is small and individuals are tied to the government by patronage. Opposition is then seen as a threat to the state’s rents and a source of destabilization that may deprive beneficiaries of redistributed wealth.

Despite steps toward political liberalization and reform increasing the margin of liberty in certain Arab countries (especially Jordan, Morocco, and Kuwait), the common feature of these regimes is still the persistence of authoritarianism and the existence of a large democratic deficit.

⁵ It is interesting to note that the two deposed presidents, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, adopted paternalistic positions in their final speeches. The two presidents addressed the young protesters as if they were their own children, reminding them of the sacrifices they had made for them. Pro-Mubarak demonstrators used the same rhetoric, reproaching the protestors for attacking and humiliating the image of the “father/president” by challenging his authority and demanding his departure.

⁶ Abdellah Hammoudi, *Master and Disciple. The Cultural Foundations of Moroccan Authoritarianism*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997.

⁷ Hazem Beblawi, Giacomo Luciani(eds), *The Rentier State*, London, Croom Helm, 1987

Nevertheless, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions of early 2011 suggest that an end to Arab authoritarianism is possible. Some of the factors at work in these revolutions suggest that nothing will ever be the same and that a dynamic of change and profound reform has been set in motion.

Fragile Legitimacies

In his analysis of the French Revolution and implicit comparison with the functioning of democracy in America, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that the strength or weakness of the state and the nature of its relations with society determined the nature of political change and the degree of radicality. According to Tocqueville, the domination of the state in France and its powerful grip on society left no room for anything but sudden change and revolution. By contrast, he noted that in America, social and political demands had a chance of bearing fruit owing to the relative weakness of the state and society's capacity for strong mobilization. The political revolution in France therefore assumed the characteristics of a religious revolution, intransigent and radical, sweeping everything before it. Not content simply to reform what needed to be reformed, it sought to create a new man and a new society.⁸ Tocqueville's view of the French Revolution can help us to understand the sources of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions.

Following decolonization, the states of the Arab world were seen as transformative powers whose mission was to foster social change and economic development and respond to hopes for greater social justice and political and economic independence. Opposition movements and opportunities for political protest and pluralism were reduced or eliminated on the grounds that they were incompatible with the struggle against imperialism and the need for economic development. Traditional structures of mediation between state and society were distorted and transformed into networks of patronage for the distribution of favors, which enabled states to consolidate their rule. The Arab-Israeli conflict also enabled many regimes to stifle the slightest vestige of opposition by brandishing the threat of a "foreign conspiracy" and compromise with "the Zionist enemy."⁹ The use of repression and violence reinforced state power vis-à-vis Arab society. All the safety valves that should have made it possible to regulate popular demands and

⁸ Tocqueville, *Œuvres*, vol. 2, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, Gallimard. p. 89.

⁹ Mubarak and his supporters alleged that the Tahrir Square protests were the result of a foreign conspiracy aimed at destabilizing his regime.

claims were closed, creating a situation of frustration and exasperation, which periodically erupted in violent protest (bread riots, assassination attempts on political leaders, etc.).

More than half a century after decolonization, and in the wake of peace treaties between Israel and two Arab countries (Egypt and Jordan), the historic legitimacy of authoritarian Arab regimes disintegrated, provoking strong protests. The nationalist discourse of certain regimes, which emphasized “the Zionist enemy” and “foreign conspiracy,” stood in total contradiction with their actual policies and with the need to join the global economy by accepting western investment and millions of tourists annually. At the same time, a demographic transformation was occurring in the region: the majority of the population is now young and totally out of sync with the current generation of leaders.¹⁰ The younger generation believes that the “grand narrative” promoted by Arab leaders concerning the struggle for independence and war against historic enemies is obsolete and useless. It is worth noting that during Egyptian President Mubarak’s final speech, in which he insisted on his history as pilot and commander of the Egyptian air force during the 1973 war against Israel, the demonstrators in Tahrir Square continued to shout “*Irhal! Irhal!*” (Get out! Get out!). For this younger generation, authoritarian Arab leaders failed in their mission. They represent a corrupt, repressive system whose only accomplishment has been to enrich themselves and their families. The demonstrators in Tunis and Cairo also criticized the regimes they toppled for their failure to set a moral example and for their corrupting influence. The collapse of regimes on account of corruption and moral decadence in the eyes of their people recalls the work of the Arab historian Ibn Khaldun. Observing the dynasties in power in North Africa, Khaldun argued that these states were initially buoyed by an *Assabiya*, a tribal or religious *esprit de corps*, which enabled a leader to clamber his way to power. But this same spirit encouraged authoritarian excesses, which then required the application of *Khisal*, that is, of the personal virtues and moral example of the ruler himself, to reverse the tendency toward injustice and corruption.¹¹ The cycle of decadence begins, Khaldun maintains, when *Khisal* disappears and people begin to believe that their leaders are morally bankrupt tyrants.

¹⁰ Mubarak is 83, Ben Ali 75, Bouteflika 74, and Kadhafi 69 (but in power for 40 years).

¹¹ Ibn Khaldûn, *Le livre des exemples*, vol. 1. Gallimard. 2002.

On this view, the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions can be seen as a renaissance, a “cleansing” operation intended to restore political and social “health.” Immediately after the departure of the two deposed presidents, the Egyptian and Tunisian protesters began cleaning the streets and squares where sit-ins had been held, in part to underscore the peaceful and organized character of their movements but also in part to symbolize the beginning of a new era, based on firm and healthy new rules.

The Army of the Shadows

In a column full of humor and irony, the Egyptian journalist Mamoun Fandi described the confrontations between demonstrators demanding the departure of Mubarak and the president’s supporters as a battle between “the donkey and Facebook.”¹² For Fandi, these clashes were symptomatic of a clash between two visions of Egypt’s future: the progressive view of modern youth in tune with their times and aspiring to democracy and universality and the contrary view of those “who wished to see Egypt return to the Middle Ages,” as the columnist put it. It is not entirely accurate to see these popular uprisings as “Facebook revolutions.” In both countries, social networks were nevertheless decisive in mobilizing young demonstrators. The use of social networks ensured that both revolutions would be spontaneous and independent of traditional political organizations. A veritable “army of the shadows,” consisting of pseudonymous posters, bloggers, and commenters, came together over many months to denounce the authoritarian nature of these two regimes in forums that were relatively immune from state censorship. The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions were fueled by photographs and videos of confrontations with the forces of order, which showed the heroism of the young demonstrators and the illegitimate violence deployed by the regimes. The video of one Egyptian protestor blocking the path of police trucks recalled the famous image of the Chinese protestor in Tiananmen Square, and this was presented as a symbol of the collapse of the Egyptian “wall of fear.” The viral transmission of these videos via shared sites and social networks emboldened new protesters and encouraged more cautious viewers to take to the streets.

¹² See <http://www.aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11756&article=606858&state=true>. The columnist alludes to the invasion of Tahrir Square by Mubarak supporters mounted on camels. Their goal was to intimidate the demonstrators.

These revolutions also reveal a collapse of the secrecy and opacity that once surrounded the Arab dictatorships. “Everyone has a clear idea of what the leader appears to be, but almost no one can see what he is, and the small number of incisive minds dare not contradict the multitude, which is protected by the majesty of the state.” This Machiavellian maxim, which Arab leaders took to heart, has been rendered inoperative. The wealth amassed by heads of state, the scandalous behavior of their entourages, and the violations of human rights they perpetrated have all been displayed on the Internet and revealed to their people. Without suggesting any causal relationship between the two events, it is worth noting that the Arab revolutions occurred within weeks of the Wikileaks revelations, which allowed Tunisians and Egyptians to see what American diplomats thought of their governments and to acquire new information about the extent of corruption in their countries. The Al Jazeera network also helped burst the bubble of opacity by giving voice to the Egyptian and Tunisian opposition. When state television networks in both countries minimized the number of demonstrators and failed to report the repression of demonstrators, Al Jazeera broadcast images of the victims and showed the extent of the mobilization.

If any one image can symbolize the inability of authoritarian Arab regimes to keep their people in the dark while feeding them disinformation, it has to be that of Egyptian state television broadcasting a tape loop showing normal traffic on a bridge over the Nile, while Al Jazeera showed hundreds of thousands of people shouting “Get out! Get out!”

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