

Pasts and Futures of Contentious Arab Politics
Social Change and the Global Middle East Series

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During the decade preceding the Arab popular uprisings ignited by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia on December 17, 2010, there were three schools of opinion about the current state and political future of the region. One contended that the expansion of civil society, often understood simply as NGOs, would gradually lead to democratization. A second emphasized the continuity and resilience of authoritarian rule and did not anticipate its demise in the foreseeable future. Proponents of a third school focused on instances of social mobilization and contentious politics under authoritarian rule - the social movements of workers, unemployed degree holders, and others marginalized by the neoliberal developmental model whether or not they openly advocated or led to democracy.

In Egypt, from 1998 to 2010, there were 3,426 strikes and other collective actions involving some 2.5 million workers.¹ These collective actions rarely raised explicit demands for democracy. But they comprised Egypt's largest social movement since the post-World War II waves of strikes and nationalist demonstrations.

A six-month rebellion in the Gafsa phosphate mining basin in 2008 prefigured the Tunisian uprising of 2010. Both movements began in midwest

and southern governorates where poverty rates and unemployment, especially for educated youth, are historically higher than the national average. As the 2010 uprising gained support in the capital, its social character became more middle class and democracy became an explicit demand.

Movements demanding democratization, an end to police abuse, gender equality, and an end to corruption and domination of the state and the market by cronies of the monarchs and presidents for life drew attention from Western observers, who perceived them to be “like us” - educated, often youthful, middle classes who wanted their countries to adopt the North Atlantic models of governance. Typically, they were less clear about their economic and social vision.

These two social movements occasionally overlapped. But they never reached the level of unity and coordination between workers and the oppositional intelligentsia achieved by the Polish Solidarity trade union and its associated social movement in the decade before the demise of the communist regime. The inability to consolidate a counterhegemonic social base is a major reason why, despite successfully overthrowing four autocratic rulers (Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya) and threatening three monarchies (Morocco, Jordan, Bahrain) the Arab popular uprisings were unable to establish stable alternatives to the existing regimes.

The inability to consolidate a counterhegemonic social base was partly due to the inability to formulate an alternative to the neoliberal economic policy package that John Williamson dubbed the Washington Consensus. Since the

mid-1970s, the international financial institutions (IFIs) and leading Western states have promoted those policies throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), particularly in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia. By the mid-2000s, they were fulsomely praising Tunisia's "economic miracle" and dubbing Egypt a "most improved reformer." IMF and World Bank reports emphasized growth, not inequitable distribution, continued marginalization of entire regions, and the consolidation of corrupt crony capitalist classes.

Bemoaning the onset of an "Arab winter" but equally, lauding Tunisia as the exceptional successful transition to democracy, overlooks a substantial component of the popular uprisings. The crowd occupying Cairo's Tahrir Square often chanted "Bread, Freedom, and Social Justice." Tunisian revolutionaries demanded "Work! Freedom! Dignity!" The latter slogan was raised again at a demonstration in Tunis in front of the headquarters of the Tunisian General Labor Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail, UGTT) marking the ninth anniversary of the ouster of former president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, suggesting that these demands had not been achieved. UGTT secretary-general Nouredine Taboubi addressed the crowd, decrying the lack of economic progress since Ben Ali's departure and vowed, "The revolution will go on until the real republic has been established."²

In the decade before Ben Ali's ouster the national unemployment rate fluctuated between 12-15 percent; since then, it has risen to 15-17 percent and around 30 percent for young, university graduates. Real wages in most sectors

have declined and annual GDP growth averaged only 1.7 percent from 2011 to 2018.³ All economic indicators declined sharply in 2020.

In January 2016 an unemployed college graduate was electrocuted in Kasserine, another marginalized midwest governorate, while protesting his removal from a list of candidates about to be appointed to a government job. His death sparked a week-long anti-austerity uprising that spread to sixteen of Tunisia's twenty-four governorates. Prominent slogans of that movement included: "The revolution of the young, confiscated by the old" and "We'll never give up our right to development and employment."

In January 2018, under pressure from IMF demands for austerity, the Tunisian government announced a budget that would raise taxes on gasoline, phone cards, housing, internet usage, and hotel rooms, and reduce subsidies on fruits and vegetables. In response, demonstration broke out in Terbouba, a rural town west of Tunis. It morphed into a violent riot after a 55-year-old man died, likely from tear gas asphyxiation. The movement encompassed at least twenty other locales, spreading via social media with the hashtag #Fech_Nestanneu (What are we waiting for?), and persisted for five days.⁴

Post-2011 Tunisian democracy was largely limited to matters of electoral procedure. The 2017 Administrative Reconciliation Law pardoned civil servants who engaged in corruption during the Ben Ali era, unless they *personally* benefited from embezzling public funds. It also permitted them to return to positions of power in government. Political deadlock has blocked establishment of the constitutional court stipulated in the constitution. Until his death in

July 2019, President Béji Caïd Essebsi (formerly foreign minister under Ben Ali) increasingly concentrated power in the presidency despite the lack of constitutional authority for many of his actions.

This established a precedent for President Kais Saïed's declaration of a state of emergency on July 25, 2021, in response to protests in Tunis, Nabeul, Sousse, Kairouan, Sfax, and Tozeur over deteriorating economic conditions and the government's mishandling of the surging Covid pandemic. Saïed suspended parliament, dismissed the prime minister and several other ministers, closed the office of Al Jazeera, and ordered several members of the Islamist Ennahda party confined to house arrest. Saïed's show of decisiveness was popular and supported by the army and the UGTT. But it also exposed that establishing a patina of procedural democracy while maintaining the economic model and recirculating many of the elites of the Ben Ali era was inadequate to meet the expectations of the popular uprising of 2010-11.

In Egypt, wildcat strikes skyrocketed after the ouster of former President Hosni Mubarak and continued during the short-lived presidency of the country's first democratically elected president, Muslim Brother Muhammad Morsi.⁵ The IMF refused to grant post-2011 Egypt a \$4.8 billion loan on conditions significantly different from those it imposed over the previous two decades. This contributed to destabilizing Morsi's presidency after the price increases and other austerity measures the IMF demanded leaked to the press in late 2012. The Muslim Brothers overreached in their effort to consolidate power. Hence, the July 2013 military coup was initially popular. Coup leader

Abdel Fattah al-Sisi assumed the presidency in 2014. Since early 2016 his praetorian dictatorship has harshly repressed strikes and all other expressions of dissent. As in Tunisia, despite the changes in Egypt's political leadership, its economic model has remained largely the same, although the military has substantially expanded its role in the economy, displacing the crony capitalists who surrounded former first son, Gamal Mubarak.

Throughout the MENA region, petro-capitalism remains the dominant regime of capital accumulation. Its power and influence radiate outward from the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, even as they are developing beyond the stage of capital accumulation based on oil and gas rents. Gilbert Achcar described the *mélange* of older and newer forms of governance that regulate this regime of capital accumulation was as “a mix of patrimonialism, nepotism, and crony capitalism, pillaging of public property, swollen bureaucracies, and generalized corruption against a background of great sociopolitical instability, and impotence or even nonexistence of the rule of law.”⁶ I would add, high military spending, low human development indices, a repressive public culture, and the prevalence of Islamist movements as the main form of political opposition. Hydrocarbon-poor countries are integrated into petro-capitalism via the remittances of their migrant workers, aid, and investments from hydrocarbon-rich GCC countries. The policies promoted by the IFIs seek to integrate this regional regime of petro-capitalism into the broader global capitalist market.

After the 2010–2011 uprisings, the IMF acknowledged that it had ignored the highly unequal distribution of the benefits of the economic model it had promoted since the late 1970s. Its then managing director wrote, “Let me be frank: We were not paying enough attention to how the fruits of economic growth were being shared.”⁷ But in practice, the same basic portfolio of policies that the IMF touted before 2011 has simply been rebranded as “inclusive growth.”

Consequently, social protests have continued and even escalated despite the apparent defeat of the revolutionary upsurge of 2011. In Morocco a protest movement of the Amazigh (Berber) population, the HIRAK Rif, persisted from October 2016 to June 2017. The movement was sparked when Mouhcine Fikri, a fish seller, was crushed to death in a garbage truck in Al Hoceima while trying to recover his confiscated merchandise, a scenario disconcertingly similar to the events that led to Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation six years earlier.

In 2018-19 an upsurge of mass protest spread across Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and briefly, Egypt. In Sudan and Algeria, autocratic presidents Omar al-Bachir and Abdelaziz Bouteflika were ousted, and some pillars of the old regimes were weakened before the Covid pandemic put an end to the popular mobilizations. Widespread demonstrations resumed in Lebanon after 3,000 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in the port of Beirut unsafely for six years exploded on August 4, 2020, killing 218 people, wounding 7,000, displacing over 300,000, and damaging 77,000 apartments. Prompted by Lebanon’s worst

economic crisis since the 1975-90 civil war, demonstrations erupted once again in March and June 2021.

The outbursts of rebellion across the MENA region over the last decade indicate that the economic and social issues highlighted by the 2011 cycle of protest, most sharply in Tunisia and Egypt, have not been adequately addressed. While they raised demands that were specific to each country and its history (Amazigh rights in Morocco and Algeria; the supply of utilities and dismantling of sectarian political structures and corruption in Lebanon and Iraq, minority rights in Sudan), they are clearly connected, both by mutual inspiration and by a common structure of political economy.

The Arab popular uprisings of 2010-2011 and the protests throughout the following decade have falsified the myth that Arab or Muslim culture are inimical to democracy. But they also affirmed that mere procedural democracy that leaves politicized militaries and old ruling elites substantially in place and does not meet the economic, social, and cultural needs of the majority of the population is insufficient. The uprisings of 2010-2011 were a moment in a continuing social upheaval that may last generations and whose outcome is unpredictable. Western powers and the IFIs do not have the legitimacy, the foresight, or the self-interest to promote the needed political and economic transformations in the region.

¹ Joel Beinin and Marie Duboc, "The Egyptian Workers Movement Before and After the 2011 Popular Uprising," *Socialist Register 2015* (Merlin Press, Pontypool, Wales, 2014), 139.

² France 24, “Thousands of Tunisians Celebrate Anniversary of Revolution,” January 14, 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200114-thousands-of-tunisians-celebrate-anniversary-of-revolution>

³ OECD Economic Surveys, *Tunisia* (Paris: OECD, March 2018), <http://www.oecd.org/economy/surveys/Tunisia-2018-OECD-economic-survey-overview.pdf>; Statista, “Tunisia: Unemployment rate from 1999 to 2020,” <https://www.statista.com/statistics/524516/unemployment-rate-in-tunisia/>

⁴ NPR, “Protests Across Tunisia Over Price Hikes, Worsening Economic Hardships,” January 11, 2018.

⁵ Beinin and Duboc, 146-47.

⁶ Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: A Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 74.

⁷ Christine Lagarde, “The Arab Spring, One Year On,” *IMFBlog*, December 6, 2012, <https://blogs.imf.org/2011/12/06/the-arab-spring-one-year-on/>