

THE MULTIDIMENSIONAL CHARACTER OF THE ARAB REVOLUTIONS

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Abstract

The sudden and sporadic nature of the awesome conflagration in the Middle East and North Africa has been a shock to many observers of the political climate in those parts of the world. This brief exercise purports to establish a rational basis, premised in history, over which this current political calamity was bound to transpire.

Introduction

Beginning in the latter part of 2010, a wave of vigorous and sustained civil unrest was suddenly galvanized and unleashed against the governments of certain Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa. By virtue of the initially slow and uncoordinated responses to the protests, the affected governments appeared not to have expected such widespread disturbances to be directed against the established status quo. This was probably because of an apparently prevailing societal sentiment that the Arab people will never overwhelmingly rise up against their governments.

However, based on certain statements clamored by some of the protesters, it seemed as if the primary reason underlying these upheavals had been rooted in the persistence of the political cultures in these countries which have, as a result, prompted widespread demands for radical political change. This is evident by virtue of the slogans expressed, through the international media, by some of the protesters. For example, early in the Tunisian Revolution, a protester vented his frustrations through this statement: “We want no food, no jobs, and no opportunities. We just want him out”. This was, apparently, a veiled reference to the then president and the entire political apparatus of that state. Further, within an identical political climate, a teenage protester in Egypt directed his

disdain at the then president who had refused to tender his resignation, as the protesters had demanded, by posing this question: “Does he not have any dignity?” Still others, in various countries in the regions, carried hand-written signs with inscriptions that suggested a determination for a comprehensive and an immediate political change: “Game Over”, “We are Tired”, “We Want Freedom for All”, “Go Out”, “Facebook”, and “Twitter”. The latter two clamors were suggestive of the significant role which certain social media had performed in undercutting the authority of these Arab governments to make the rapid assembly of protest crowds possible.

The sum total of this type of political behavior which has included marching, clamoring, fighting, and dying, constituted a negative popular reaction to the domestic policies of these governments in their respective jurisdictions. Additionally, the eruption of this political activity was accompanied by a platform of articulated general demands from the protesters. Among these demands were: one, that since the existing political order was no longer acceptable to the masses, all those who had been an integral part of that order must leave office now as a measure of the beginning of change; and two, that there must be an immediate transformation of the existing political order to the formation of democratic institutions, popular elections, and the rule of law. In an attempt to demonstrate their resolve, the protesters threatened that the upheavals and other forms of challenge will continue, unabated, until these articulated radical political changes were realized.

James Q. Wilson et al in their book, *American Government: Institutions and Policies*, define political culture as “a patterned and sustained way of thinking about how political and economic life ought to be carried out”. Therefore on this basis, it can be stated that the masses of people, who had for decades suffered from political, economic, and social deprivation, attempted to engender meaningful reforms toward addressing their plight, by suddenly reacting robustly in the form of civil disobedience against the established order. The concept of civil disobedience had originally been propounded by Henry David Thoreau, in his 1849 essay entitled: *On the Duty of Civil Disobedience*, in which he had implied that the masses of people do have a moral obligation to disobey the laws of their

governments if such laws were deemed inequitable and unjust regarding any one or a combination of the population's political, economic, and social welfare.

The three historical examples, which follow, fall within the realm of perhaps the most notable civil disobedience efforts toward prompting radical government change. One, the 1848 revolutions in Europe in which the oppressed masses, as one of several political factions, sought reforms that would improve their political, social, and economic conditions. These revolutions do have more in common with the Arab revolutions in the sense that they involved populations in several states within a particular geographic region. Additionally, their primary focus was the reform of the existing political order, the effort of which was expected to address effectively the existing mal-conditions of the affected populations. Two: Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent political movement in India which, in 1947, contributed significantly in bringing about India's sovereignty from British colonial rule. Three, Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement in the United States, which fostered the passage of the civil rights laws that began the assimilation of minorities into the mainstream of American political, social, and economic life. Therefore, taking these examples into consideration, the Arab revolutions have certainly not been without historical precedents.

By virtue of the analyses stated above, this writer shall attempt to elaborate on the major historical and contemporary factors underlying the upsurge of the entrenched Arab revolutions. These factors, which are multidimensional, will be addressed through the positing of general analyses regarding the social, political, and economic conditions that prevailed in these countries for a prolonged period of time. According to Albert Hourani in his 1991 book, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, three [multidimensional] factors are identified as having been responsible for the polarization of the populations in these countries. These are: one, the prevailing ethnic and religious divisions; two, the growing rift between the rich and the poor; and three, the oppressive treatment meted out to women as a category in society. On the basis of these models, this writer postulates that the festering of these polarizing conditions eventually caused the political eruptions

which have typified the Arab revolutions. This is demonstrated below through a brief itemization and analyses of what this writer shall refer to as the Hourani models.

Model One: Ethnic and Religious Divisions

In this model, Hourani made a number of observations with regard to certain Arab states in North Africa and the Middle East. Limited but applicable examples of these observations are outlined below.

- “In Iraq, there was the opposition of Arabs and the Kurds. The Kurdish minority of the north-east of the country had for long been neglected in the measures of economic and social change which were carried out mainly in districts nearer to the large cities”.
- “A similar situation existed, potentially, in Algeria. Part of the population of the mountain areas of the Atlas in Morocco and Kabylia in Algeria were Berbers, speaking dialects of a language different from Arabic and with a long tradition of local organization and leadership”.
- “A situation of great danger and complexity existed in countries with large Shiite populations: Iraq, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Lebanon. The Iranian revolution seemed likely to arouse a stronger sense of Shiite identity, and this could have political implications in countries where government was firmly in the hands of Sunnis”.

There are other sources that are somewhat in agreement with the underlying premise of Hourani’s model pertaining to the impact of ethnic and religious divisions in the Arab world. For example, Halim Barakat, in his 1993 book entitled *The Arab World: Society, Culture, and State*, made these observations: one, persons and groups in the eastern Arab world view themselves, and are viewed by others, in religious terms; two, in the Gulf states, “no Sunni candidate who ran for elections could win in electoral districts inhabited mostly by Shiites”; three, religious sectarianism has been employed as a tool to maintain certain privileges or redress grievances; and four, the use of sectarianism would imply that those in the “minority”, who may also be non-Islamic, may be excluded from pivotal

political decision-making. In addition, the *Lex Communis* website indicates the following regarding Syria: “Basically, a large majority of Syria – officially, some 74 percent – is Sunni Muslim, and the nation’s politics for almost fifty years has been devoted to ensuring that this majority does not gain power”. In an effort to dramatize the impact of this model on segments of the Arab people, the writer shall conclude this section through a number of pertinent remarks that follow.

One, the Shiites and the Sunnis constitute the two major sectarian Islamic entities in the Arab world. Under these circumstances, there are cases in the Arab countries such as the one in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq whereby the Sunnis, despite their smaller numbers, had been politically-dominant over the majority Shiites. As was somewhat the case in other Arab countries, the tensions that continued to rise eventually resulted in explosions which became an integral part of the Arab revolutions. In the case of Iraq, this political “imbalance”, along with the issue of the discrimination against the minority Kurds, was altered following the 2003 invasion of the country by United States forces.

Two, as reflected in the Hourani model above, the Iranian revolution of 1979 which had been conducted largely by Shiite clerics, in actuality greatly influenced the Shiite “revolutionaries” in the Arab countries to protest against such an established order which had been contemptuous of them. Viewed from a religious perspective, these “oppressed sects” visualized, through these revolutions, an opportunity to alter the balance of power which had been stacked against them. In this respect, therefore, it can be stated that since various groups of Arabs protested for various reasons, it was therefore not too challenging a task to assemble a coalition of such groups on an emergency basis in order to vent their venom on the established order.

Three, an academic phenomenon that explains instability among various ethnic and religious groups is the concept of values. According to Henry L. Tischler, in his book entitled *Introduction to Sociology*, the term values is defined as “a culture’s general orientations toward life – its notion of what is good and bad, what is desirable and undesirable”. With regard to these revolutions, it appears as if the differences in values

also constituted another significant level of polarization among the ethnic and religious groups inhabiting these regions. In other words, this situation became tantamount to one in which uncompromising cultures existed within each respective society with the real possibility of a conflagration in the long term. Given that, an effective approach toward addressing such differences or polarizations would have required that the political systems establish conditions over which political compromises could have been garnered in decision-making, in order to bring about internal political stability. However, because of the inability to engender such compromises, political instability inevitably emerged and persisted. Further, in the economic realm, the lack of political compromises also disallowed a genuine effort toward an equitable distribution of societal artifacts. Therefore, it seemed that the combination of political instability and the inequitable distribution of societal artifacts, which existed in tandem for a prolonged period, sowed the seeds of discontent that eventually contributed to bringing about the wave of civil disturbances in these countries.

Model Two: Growing Rift between Rich and Poor

In this model, Hourani made a series of observations regarding the allocation of economic resources to the populations in the Arab countries. Significant examples of these observations follow.

- The gap between rich and poor, which “had of course always existed”, was “growing wider in most Arab countries” despite the fact that there was: economic growth, as a result of the increase in profits from the sale of oil; an increase in bank loans and grants; increased domestic investments; and remittances or financial resources sent by migrant workers to their relatives. In other words, the irony was, as economic growth increased the gap between the rich and the poor also increased.
- The governments spent a large amount of the proceeds from economic development on the purchase of military hardware, “mainly from the USA and western Europe”.

- “Almost everywhere the most neglected sector was the agricultural” [sector], even though the vast majority of the populations resided in villages or the rural areas where agriculture had usually been predominant.
- The neglect of the agricultural sector produced the following outcomes: “In Saudi Arabia, 58 per cent of the economically active population lived in the countryside but produced only 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product [GDP]”; in Egypt, 52 per cent of the population lived in the countryside but produced only 28 per cent of the GDP; and finally, these imbalances created a situation whereby, in the 1970’s, “a large proportion of food consumed in the Arab countries was imported”.
- Economic growth did not raise the living standards of the mass population because the rate of growth in the population surpassed the ability of the governments to provide for the welfare of their people; in addition to the fact that, “the political and social systems of most Arab countries did not provide for a more equal distribution of the proceeds of production”.
- As a result of the neglect of the agricultural sector and the opportunities which urban areas appeared to promise, urban populations increased dramatically through mass migrations from the countryside. These migrations caused the following urban population concentration in the 1970’s: more than 50 per cent of the populations of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, and Algeria lived in cities; between 40 to 50 per cent of the populations of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria also lived in cities; and by the mid-1970’s, over a million people inhabited approximately eight Arab cities in which some of the most heavily inhabited ones were Cairo [Egypt] with a population of 6.4 million , and Baghdad [Iraq] with a population of 3.8 million.
- The combination of the increased rate of economic growth and the rapid rate of urban migration by the economically destitute, also led to an increased level of polarization between the rich and poor. Specifically, the beneficiaries of economic growth were the elites in society: the political leadership, the military officers, higher-level government officials, technicians, various types of businessmen, and

- skilled industrial workers. Those who benefited less or not at all included: small employees, small traders, those who work for the rich, “those employed in the informal sector”, and the unemployed.
- In the countryside, medium and large-size landowners could cultivate their land profitably because they had access to credit, which was not available to small landowners.
 - The migrant workers in the oil-producing states had no job security because they could not engage in collective bargaining with their employers. This situation meant that they could be arbitrarily terminated and be replaced by non-Arab labor from Asia and other parts of Africa, who were willing to accept the prevailing conditions of employment.
 - Housing in the large cities was cheap and deplorable. For example, “in most cities the water and drainage systems had been constructed for smaller communities, and could not cope with the demands of a larger population”.
 - Public transportation was deplorable as well, making travel from place to place a rather tedious enterprise for those who could not afford to secure private transportation.

The economic model reveals a number of trends the combination of which eventually drove a large number of people to make the sacrifices they deemed necessary in an attempt to alter the status quo. These trends will be analyzed.

One, according to Karl E. Case and Ray C. Fair, in their 2003 textbook entitled, *Principles of Macroeconomics*, economic growth is defined as an increase in the total output of an economy. This increased output of goods and services in an economy, assuming that output grows faster than the population, should ultimately translate to the availability of employment opportunities and a commensurate increase in the standards of living of the population. This simple macroeconomic principle was not operational in this case because, as the model above has suggested, population growth exceeded economic growth, in addition to the fact that there were inequities built into the distribution of the

proceeds from economic growth. The overall impact of this situation was, of course, the creation of large numbers of economically-deprived groups that became an integral part of the Arab revolutions.

Two, the governments appeared to have had their public finance priorities confused when, according to the model, they spent large sums of the proceeds from economic growth in securing foreign armaments in an effort to boost their military capabilities. This writer understands the security issues that may have been of concern to these Arab governments prompting them to behave in this manner; for example, their volatile relationship with the state of Israel with which they have fought several wars, and also the political issues that surround the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Nevertheless, a primary function of government is to address the welfare of its people, a significant responsibility which some of these governments appeared to have neglected. Using the model as a guide, therefore, the writer states that more funding should have been allocated toward addressing the issues of housing, the water and drainage systems, and mass transit facilities in order to accommodate population explosion in the cities.

Three, the neglect of the agricultural sector was a major mistake because it contributed significantly toward the rural population's mass migration to the cities, as the partially employed and unemployed searched for economic opportunities that were no longer available in the countryside. This sudden population concentration posed a serious challenge to the governments which appeared ill-prepared to address effectively the social and economic needs of these new urban dwellers. The result of this situation was urban congestion, unemployment, and poverty among a myriad of other forms of social malaise. It is no wonder, therefore, that the Arab revolutions were, by and large, concentrated in the urban areas of these countries.

Four, even in the major oil-producing countries, to which some of the poor Arabs have managed to obtain employment, the situation pertaining to their conditions of work was also deplorable. This is so because, according to the model, a lack of the ability to

organize labor unions in an effort to embark on collective bargaining meant that, primarily, Arab workers had no rights and as a result were not only disposable at a moment's notice, but that they would have no control over wages paid, conditions of work, and other personnel issues. Moreover, the fact that other workers, who are desperate for work, from parts of Asia and Africa were willing and waiting to be offered positions, would imply that the Arab workers were in keen competition with this type of labor. Operating under such conditions, the Arab workers would be forced to accept the prevailing conditions of work just so that they can stay employed and are still able to send remittances home to their families.

Model Three: the Treatment of Women

In this model, Hourani made a number of observations pertaining to the struggle to determine the role of women in the Arab societies. Examples of these observations follow.

- Even though women and girls were now becoming educated and literate, and that some of them even held positions of influence in the professions and in government in certain Arab states that were attempting to “modernize”, the traditional problems of women in society have, nevertheless, persisted.
- In the countryside, women stayed home to attend to family and domestic matters while the men, the household providers, would migrate to the oil-producing countries, for example, in search of employment which would enable them to send remittances to their families.
- In the cities, the employment of women in factories, for example, was contingent on whether or not there was an adequate supply of men. If, for example, the economies were to sink into a recession, the women would always be the first to be terminated.
- “Unskilled women were more likely to find work as domestic servants; these were mainly young unmarried girls coming from the villages”.
- In the cities, as a result of education and literacy, girls were no longer getting married in their mid-teens, but in their late teens and twenties.

- In the cities, “Not only was the veil less common than it had been, but other forms of separation of men and women were disappearing”, despite the fact that some Arab countries, such as Saudi Arabia, still maintained a strict code of segregation between the sexes.
- Despite these changes, most of which had transpired in the cities, the superiority of the male continued to be upheld, dictated primarily by *sharia* or Islamic law. For example, polygamy was still allowed to continue in most countries; the husband could divorce his wife “without giving reasons and without due process”; and the divorced husband had uncontested custody rights of the children at certain ages.
- “Even when laws were changed, social customs did not necessarily change with them. New laws could not always be enforced, particularly when they came up against deeply rooted social customs which asserted and preserved the domination of the male. That girls should marry early, that their marriages should be arranged, and that wives could easily be repudiated were firmly rooted ideas, preserved by women themselves; the mother and the mother-in-law were often pillars of the system”.
- “There were, however, an increasing number of women who did not accept the system and were claiming the right to define their own identity and bring about changes in their social status which reflected that new definition”.

Delineated above, the status of women model reveals the extent of the treatment of women in these societies, and the circumstances over which change had been very difficult to engender. Therefore, in an attempt to provide the rationale for the reaction of certain women to this type of treatment, the writer shall attempt to analyze briefly the impact of various aspects of the treatment women.

One, the fact that women had been expected to perform domestic roles largely, in their relationships with men, implied that they could not aspire to be competitive on the basis of equality with men in such areas as education, the professions, and leadership. As a

result, this implied that the concentration of power was almost absolutely in the hands of men. In addition, this also implied that some women could not possibly be successful in society without the support, agreement, or endorsement of some type of a man.

Further, the apparent notion that women had been mere “conveniences” of men had been challenged by both educated and “enlightened” Arab women for quite some time. For example, during the revolutions, which appeared to have provided some type of “cover” and momentum for these women, some have openly articulated their disenchantment against the way in which their societies have treated them from a sexual standpoint. For example in Egypt, some women complained over the international media of “virginity tests” that are still being administered on them, despite the revolutionary fervor, as apparently degrading. In Libya, Iman al-Obeidi claimed that she had been assaulted by President Gaddafi’s soldiers at the start of the civil war, and made a bold and unprecedented effort to approach the international media in a hotel in order to report her claim, with the probable underlying intention of influencing world opinion regarding the plight of women in Libya. This behavior from a woman in the Arab world was regarded as unusual because according to Martin Chulov, in an article printed in the Guardian entitled *Libyan Woman ‘raped by Gaddafi troops’ flees to Tunisia*, “it is rare in Libyan society for a woman to go public with a claim of rape, which is widely seen as dishonoring the victim and her family, rather than the attacker”.

Two, the problems associated with the employment of young women as domestic workers have been well documented in a number of studies. For example, in a 2004 International Labor Organization project entitled *Gender and Migration in Arab States: the Case of Domestic Workers*, edited by Simel Esim and Monica Smith, four Arab states were employed as case studies: Bahrain, Kuwait, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. Even though the authors of the articles have not indicated succinctly that the problems confronted by the young women in these countries, would be indicative of the same or similar ones faced by young women in the other Arab states, this writer reasons that as a result of physical geography and cultural similarities, the treatment would not necessarily be radically different in other countries. The study indicated a pattern of

difficulties faced by this disadvantaged cadre of workers the vast majority of who have emanated from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Collectively, the cross-sectional problems indicated were: physical abuse, sexual abuse, psychological abuse, and verbal abuse.

Further, since domestic workers have also been recruited outside of North Africa and the Middle East, a case can be made that the Arab women may also be faced with a situation of excess labor supply which would commensurately lower wages, provide little or no job security, and increase the intensity of tasks. Therefore, the idea of being replaceable would perhaps force such persons to make the necessary “compromises” in order to remain employed.

Conclusion

Given the revelations made in this writing, some may wonder exactly why the genesis of the fragmentation of these regimes had not taken place much earlier. In other words, what was it that gave these regimes a semblance of stability amidst the chaos and confusion that obviously underlay that semblance? In his book, Hourani also provided some insights into this apparent paradox.

- One, the apparatus of control and repression which the governments had assembled, has been unprecedented in the history of their existence.

Therefore, in as much as the idea of the manifestation of a riot in order to demonstrate popular displeasure over the behavior of government concerning a particular policy was not actually new in the Arab experience, the fact that the governments were able to quell those disturbances with decisive brute force enabled them to survive longer, until the present galvanized and social media-coordinated revolutions determined otherwise. Additionally, the governments appeared to have had no built-in mechanisms, such as might have been the case in the Chinese and Iranian experiences, either to preempt, prevent, or demolish any attempt at a popular challenge against their authority with the use of modern social media. Further, it appears as if earlier successes of the use of brute

force made these governments somewhat complacent, never thinking that a repetition of the use of the same or similar magnitude of force may one day be unsuccessful, as Syria and Libya have experienced. To make matters worse, at least some of the so-called reforms which some Arab governments had attempted to implement were actually piecemeal efforts that amounted to nothing significant in terms of real political change. The situation in Syria has been significant in this regard.

- Two, the Arab political systems incorporated the political styles of family and/or institutional rule, depending on the country under examination.

Institutional rule would reflect either military rule or political party rule. For example, the current military power structure in Egypt has been in existence since the overthrow of the monarchy, by Gamal Abdel Nasser and others, in 1952. However, the attempt by Hosni Mubarak, the former president, to establish a political dynasty in the country was torpedoed by the Egyptian revolution. In Syria, as already implied, the Alawite political faction had monopolized political power in the state for a considerable period of time; and Bashar Al Assad, the current embattled leader, had succeeded his father to become president of the country in dynastic fashion. In Libya, despite the fact that Moammar Gaddafi had regarded his overthrow of the monarchy in 1969 as a revolution or a change, he himself has mimicked an element of the monarchy by creating a system of family or dynastic rule in the country. This political behavior has had the tendency of an ongoing concentration of political power in the hands of “like-minded” individuals. From a political standpoint, therefore, such infrastructures have had the potential of providing short term stability in their respective societies, with little or no internal or external disturbances that could not be dealt with effectively.

- Three, the Arab governments also established their own version of an elite system within which power and prosperity were shared among supportive members.

As this writer indicated earlier, concerning the distribution of economic benefits in these countries, the elite group would constitute a combination of the political figures, the bureaucracies with the military at the pinnacle, and members of the commercial community. As a theoretical phenomenon, the strength or power of such a group always lies in the fact that, since there are tangible and intangible benefits to obtain, it follows that it would therefore be in the collective interest of the membership to support the group's self-sustenance efforts. Additionally, the number of individuals in such groups is comparably smaller to the sum total of individuals in the rest of society. This phenomenon partly explains the reason Hosni Mubarak had earlier refused to relinquish the Egyptian presidency. The same principle also explains the reason underlying the refusal of the leaders of Syria, Libya, and Yemen to leave office; and, the refusal of practically all of the Arab governments to implement the changes demanded by the protesters. The practical rationale underlying this behavior is that relinquishing the leadership would have been tantamount to an abandonment of the entire political infrastructure which had, hitherto, depended on that leadership for its existence. The leaders of Egypt and Tunisia, for example, eventually left office only partly due to the pressure exerted upon them by their powerful global benefactor, the United States.

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