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PERSPECTIVES

'But this time everything turns out differently': What the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings mean for the Middle East

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‘But this time everything turns out differently’:
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Anthony Bubalo

But this time everything turns out differently. The policeman shouts, but the man doesn't run. He just stands there, looking at the policeman. It's a cautious look, still tinged with fear, but at the same time tough and insolent. So that's the way it is! The man on the edge of the crowd is looking insolently at uniformed authority. He doesn't budge. He glances around and sees the same look on their faces. Like his, their faces are watchful, still a bit fearful, but already firm and unrelenting. Nobody runs though the policeman has gone on shouting; at last he stops. There is a moment of silence. We don't know whether the policeman and the man on the edge of the crowd realize what has happened. The man stopped being afraid – and this is precisely the beginning of the revolution.

Ryszard Kapuscinski, *Shah of Shahs*

The great Polish journalist and observer of revolutions, Ryszard Kapuscinski, wrote the above passage about the Iranian revolution of 1979. He could have been writing (were he still alive) about the recent popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. I say this not because I expect that the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings will turn out like the Iranian revolution. (There is no charismatic religious authority in Tunisia or Egypt returning triumphantly from exile at the head of a focused and ruthless revolutionary vanguard.) Kapuscinski captures something important about popular revolutions no matter where they take place.

Kapuscinski reminds us that popular uprisings and revolutions are not just the result of decisions made by conspirators in smoke-filled rooms, nor of the keystrokes of web activists huddled around a Facebook page. Planning and organisation do play a very important role in popular revolutions, but uprisings fail or succeed at unseen and unplanned moments. In Kapuscinksi's vignette it occurs the moment fear is transferred from protestors to police; in Tunisia and Egypt I suspect something like this happened as well. The point is that it is difficult to understand why it happens. Both Tunisia and Egypt witnessed protests before, even Facebook-organised ones, that did not topple, nor even mildly shake, their respective regimes.

This means we need to be cautious about extrapolating what the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings will mean for other countries in the Middle East. It is not just the obvious point that countries and situations are different. It is also because the success or failure of popular uprisings hinges on a complex interplay of decisions, actions, resilience, weakness, mistakes and panic by actors on both sides of the political drama. To use Kapuscinski's words, this time everything may well turn out differently in other countries of the region, as it has in Tunisia and Egypt. It is just not going to be particularly clear why.

So what happened?

My reflection on Kapuscinski's vignette is meant merely as a caution about the effort to draw implications from Tunisia and Egypt for the rest of the region. It does not mean we should not try. To do so, however, we first have to be clear about what did happen in Tunisia and Egypt. In fact, there was a surprisingly similar chain of events. Protestors with a diverse set of grievances, but united around a common desire for regime, and in particular, leadership change, and organised partly through social media, began a series of peaceful protests. The security forces reacted to these protests with typical, if not overwhelming, brutality, but were unable to bring them to an end over a period of weeks. This caused the regime great uncertainty: it promised reform, while also applying increasing doses of repression, but without any success. Finally, the regime fractured, deserting its long-time leader in an effort to save itself.

This last point about the regime's deserting its leader is very important. This is why, at the time of writing, I would still hesitate to call the popular uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt revolutions. Whilst the man at the top is gone, much of the regime – the provincial governors, ruling party figures, business oligarchs, state security and, in particular, the military leadership – remains in place, although for how long is not clear. In the case of Egypt, for example, the rump of the regime will fight to keep post-Mubarak Egypt a lot like Mubarak's Egypt and they might well succeed (at least in the short term). In fact, I suspect that significant parts of the old regime and system of government will not survive. Different regime elements will jostle for power and there are bound to be winners, losers and little loyalty shown. (For example, Egypt's hastily appointed Vice-President Omar Suleiman looked initially like Mubarak's successor, but will probably now end up an early casualty of his leader's demise). New political actors will emerge and some old ones will be revitalized. Indeed, many of our old assumptions about the political landscape in Egypt should now be tossed away. Nevertheless, it will be a while before we know just how different things will be.

There is also no doubt that the Egyptian uprising was inspired by the success of the uprising in Tunisia, and that both have now gone on to inspire unrest in other countries of the region, including (at the time of writing) Algeria, Jordan, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen and Iran. This has worked in two ways: on the one hand, Egyptian protestors drew hope and lessons from the success of the protestors in Tunisia; on the other hand, the Egyptian regime was unnerved by the fate of its counterpart in Tunis. This helps explain why the regime in Egypt responded to the protests with such a lack of assuredness and why its unsuccessful vacillation between repression and concession is now being repeated by other regimes in the region.

The return of politics

This is the simplest explanation of what happened in Tunisia and Egypt and its impact in the region. But there is a more complex explanation that takes into account the various grievances behind the uprising and some of the longer-term trends that have culminated in the overthrow of long-standing leaders. Understanding these will provide a better indication of what this recent political ferment will mean for other countries in the region.

In my view, what we have seen in Tunisia and Egypt, and what we are now seeing elsewhere in the region, represents the re-politicisation of Middle Eastern societies. It seems odd to talk about the return of politics to the societies of the Middle East, a region that seems, if anything, to be afflicted by too much of the stuff. (I am talking of course about domestic politics not international politics.) Yet politics that involved and engaged broader societies of the region has been missing for a great many years. This might seem normal in autocratic societies but I would argue that even in the first two decades of many of the regimes in the region we saw more politics than we have in the last two. To the extent that there was any domestic politics at all it came with strictly enforced rules and boundaries: only certain political actors were allowed to participate; opposition movements were either loyal or illegal; if there were parliamentary elections ruling parties always won, even if the margin would sometimes be altered to give the appearance of politics; and protests were restricted in time, place and size, sometimes by the agreement of the protestors themselves, sometimes by the swift actions of security forces.

There were, of course, opposition movements that did challenge regimes efforts to stifle politics, most notably the various national incarnations of the Muslim Brotherhood. Sometimes these groups even momentarily revived politics, in the cracks occasionally appeared in the system, as when the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood re-energised the internal elections of the country's professional syndicates in the 1980s and 90s. But ultimately, even

the Brotherhood, as the region's most effective opposition movement, was either subdued (as in Egypt), co-opted (as in Yemen) or mostly eliminated (as in Syria). There were also, in most countries, liberals and reformists: the usual motley array of human rights and democratisation activists, reformist dissenters from ruling parties, and journalists and editors prepared to push the boundaries of censorship. These too did breathe the occasional bit of life into Middle Eastern politics (for example, Ayman Nour in Egypt's 2005 Presidential election), but not so much as to get the broader population really interested or engaged.

Indeed, what we saw by and large (and with a few exceptions) was a deep popular resignation and apathy about politics. Politics was seen by most people in the region as pointless, dangerous or both. Ordinary people would walk past demonstrations lamenting 'why bother, nothing will change'. Amongst the young, in particular, there was an aversion to politics, and not just because of the regime's discouragement. In the leadership of the main opposition movements, both loyal and illegal, the youth often found the same patriarchy, paternalism and vanity as they saw in the regime.

The events in Tunisia and Egypt reflect both the sudden and gradual onset of re-politicisation. It has been sudden because, quite clearly, successful uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt have given a major boost to popular political participation. Politics might still be dangerous, but it is no longer pointless. Moreover, a new generation of activists have been brought to the fore in the politics of the region, which on its own will inject new energy into the political sphere.

At the same time, the re-politicisation of Middle Eastern societies hardly began two months ago with the first protests in Tunisia. There has been gradual and in some regards subconscious re-politicisation that can be traced back a decade and a half. There were at least three key drivers to this process: specifically, two revolutions and a crisis. The first of these was the Middle East's new media revolution that began with the founding of al-Jazeera in the mid-1990s. Through its interviews with regime critics and opponents, its 'counterpoint' ype programs and its exploration of socially and political taboo subjects, al-Jazeera gave the broader populations a taste of politics far more palatable and interesting than the slow and heavy courses of propaganda and protocol news served to them by state-run media. Others followed al-Jazeera's lead, either on television, in print, or on the internet, including a new generation of blogger-journalists keen to critique the social, political and economic fabric of their respective societies.

This was followed in the mid-noughties by the beginnings of the social media revolution worldwide, which quickly spread to the Middle East. This played a role in the re-polticisation

of Middle Eastern societies in two ways. Most obvious and most discussed has been the role of Facebook and Twitter as tools in the organisation and recording of popular unrest, and the building of connections between regime opponents and the outside world. We have seen that not just in the recent Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, but also in the 2009 protests in Iran.

Social media has, however, played another role in the re-politicisation of Middle Eastern societies that has received far less attention, particularly in the politicisation of the youth. The internet gave individuals a place to express their views about life and their communities freely that was, at least initially, beyond the reach and control of the regime. This expression may not have even been particularly political nor ideological to begin with (although in some cases it was). The first political act of these internet activists might simply have been to share with others some personal experience of corruption or police brutality or some other example of what was wrong with the way their country was run. Expressing their views in this way in the unregulated space of the internet eventually brought these individuals to the attention of state security services. That attention, reflected in the imprisonment, torture and sometimes death of bloggers and other web activists in a variety of Middle Eastern countries over the last few years, served to politicise (or further politicise) both those being arrested and harassed, but also their friends and followers with whom they were connected on the internet. It is no coincidence that the one of the organisers of the January 25 protests in Egypt, Wael Ghonim, was also behind the Facebook page dedicated to Khaled Sayed, a young Alexandrian tortured and killed by Egyptian police in 2010 for the act of posting a film of police corruption on the web.

The third driver was what can be termed very broadly as the socio-economic crisis facing most societies of the region, albeit to varying degrees. In fact, this is more accurately cast as a whole series of crises that have played out over a number of years in the region (to differing degrees in different countries), but have generally become more acute of late. That is, crises of unemployment and underemployment; of education, health and social welfare; of declining subsidies and rising food and fuel prices; and of corruption and of growing and apparent disparities in income. For lower socio-economic classes these crises have underlined the state's inability to provide for their basic needs, ironically at a time when many of the regions economies were actually growing. For these groups, politics was gradually becoming a necessity just to live. This was reflected, for example, in the strikes and protests in Egypt's textile industry in 2008 which coincided with that year's food crisis. In fact, the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt reflected the interaction of all three of these drivers: the protests were organised and publicised, at least initially, via the social media revolution; they were sustained by the new media revolution, (particularly al-Jazeera); and the protests were fed and

attracted support beyond those with access to Facebook or al-Jazeera because of the socio-economic crisis many people faced.

A crisis of authority

Because the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings were a result of a process of gradual re-politicisation over many years – and because they will greatly spur on this process of re-politicisation – it is unlikely that their impact in the region will be short-lived. Even if the current protests we are now seeing in a variety of countries in the region do not topple their rulers, the impact of Tunisia and Egypt will be felt in the region for years to come in ways that will surprise us.

There is, of course, a real possibility that popular enthusiasm for politics will wane for a number of reasons: people need to return to work; the desire for change may be sated somewhat by the toppling of the long-time ruler; and their will undoubtedly be dashed expectations of reform and of the extent to which new regimes – or re-configured old ones – can meet socio-economic and political demands. Nevertheless, there is another reason that I believe that re-politicisation is unlikely to be fleeting. It is because of another crisis in the region that has been running in parallel to, but also facilitating, the re-politicisation of Middle Eastern societies: namely, a crisis of authority. Each country in the region is afflicted by it to differing degrees. Indeed, I think it is a very useful measure by which to judge how well regimes will or will not cope with the current political ferment in the region.

Middle Eastern autocrats do not rule by coercion alone. Their authority comes from a combination of popularity or perceived legitimacy, their ability to meet people's needs for jobs, food, shelter etc (what might be called positive competency) as well as their ability to use repression when necessary (what might be called negative competency). With few exceptions, in recent years all the regimes in the region have been afflicted by the erosion of one or more sources of their authority. Most typically it was because of declining positive competency, as sclerotic bureaucracies struggled to meet demands of growing populations with, in most cases, diminishing means. Sometimes it was just longevity that was eroding a ruler's popularity, or the new media environment in the region, that was seeing more people question their ruler's legitimacy. In some cases negative competency has been declining as, for example, security forces gradually lose the battle to control information. In some cases, the balance between the various sources of authority has been disturbed. For example, a decline in positive competency is forcing a greater and unsustainable reliance on negative competency to preserve the leader's or regime's authority.

This crisis of authority is not just evident between ruling regimes and their populations. It is also occurring within regimes, particularly those in which leaders and their immediate family or circle have held power for long periods. This was evident in both Tunisia and Egypt, where it was not just the popular protests that brought down Presidents Ben Ali and Mubarak, but the decision within the regime to abandon its leader. The crisis of authority is evident elsewhere too: in institutions, movements and groups that often mimic the autocratic and patriarchal practices of the ruling regime. It is even present in opposition movements. In recent years, for example, both the Muslim Brotherhood and the secular Kefaya movement in Egypt experienced significant and public disputes between their elderly leaders and youth members. Indeed, the crisis of authority reflects, in particular, a generational gap as the young members of Middle Eastern societies revolt against patriarchy and paternalism.

In the cases of President Ben Ali in Tunisia and President Mubarak in Egypt, all three sources of authority collapsed in the final days of their rule, but had also been eroding in recent years. There was certainly evidence that the popularity or perceived legitimacy of both leaders had been eroding. (Although this is the most difficult source of authority to measure empirically in an autocracy – including for the autocrat – and we should be careful about attributing the views of a vocal group of protestors to the majority of the population.) In Mubarak's case, for example, suspicions that he was manoeuvring his son to replace him had seen more vocal and brazen criticism of the President over the last five or six years.

It is easier to point to signs of a collapse in positive competency: both countries were struggling with the maintenance of subsidies, the effects of food price spikes and unemployment. In both cases negative competency also failed: the police and security service traditional tactics did not work as protestors proved more resilient and better organised than in the past; the constant gaze of the international media made it difficult to hide repressive moves; Tunisia's and, in particular Egypt's, economic reliance on the outside world placed limits on the amount of repression they could apply (even though there were still hundreds of deaths and arrests in both cases, there could have been a lot more); and most important of all – reflecting also the failure of authority within the regime – the military were not prepared to save leaders they felt no longer best ensured their interests.

Who will be next to go?

As I noted earlier, the region's crisis of authority can help us to understand which regimes in the region are more at risk of being overthrown by any popular unrest and which are in stronger position to survive. I think based on this criterion alone, the countries of the region

can be divided into three very loose groups, with some countries on the margins between the groups.

The first group would comprise those countries where the crisis of authority is deepest and which would be most at risk if they faced a sustained outbreak of popular unrest. There are not that many countries in this group. Yemen probably is, because it faces a particularly acute economic crisis, on top of other problems (including tribal unrest and secessionist issues in the south), and has a long-serving President whose means and possibly even will to respond to the country's problems is greatly diminished. As we have seen in recent days, Libya also faces a similar level of risk, again because the leader has been around for many years, socio-economic problems have grown and there is potential for the military to split along tribal lines. Colonel Qaddafi has already shown his willingness to be more repressive than his counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt, although this might not save him (and will be an important lesson for similar regimes in the region if Qaddafi falls).

Algeria might also scrape into this category because of socio-economic problems, although its current President has not been around as long as his former counterparts in Tunisia and Egypt. Bahrain might be considered on the margins of this group as well, as the unrest there would seem to underline. Yet the regime is protected in part by the fact that the Sunni minority, even if they share some of the grievances of the Shi'ite majority (that are also the majority amongst the protestors) is likely to side with the regime for self-interested reasons. Whilst the King's initially harsh reaction to the protests has undermined his support and legitimacy, the role being played by the reputedly reformist Crown Prince in mollifying protestors will help the regime as a whole withstand popular disaffection. (Indeed, even a move by the Crown Prince to retire his father would not be without precedent amongst the Gulf emirates.)

For these and other reasons, Bahrain might equally fit into the second and largest category of countries. That is, those that also face many of the same problems and popular grievances that we saw in Tunisia and Egypt, but where, for different reasons, the authority of the ruler, if not always the regime, is still reasonably strong. In some cases it is because the ruler is still popular or seen as legitimate (Jordan and Morocco) and can deflect any expressions of popular grievance onto his government (typically sacking them as King Abdullah of Jordan already has); in some cases it is because the regime still has the economic means to deal with grievances (Kuwait); in some cases there are peculiar factors (for example, the sectarian dimensions in Bahrain and Lebanon); and there are those countries with still strong instruments of repression and a willingness to use them (Syria, Sudan and Iran).

Finally, there is the third category where the authority of rulers is probably in the strongest position to deal with any unrest, if there is any. Saudi Arabia scrapes into this category – and might arguably be put into the second – because of King Abdullah's still reasonably strong legitimacy and popularity, the proficiency of the country's security forces and the fact that it does have the financial means to paper over socio-economic problems in the short term, although not solve them in the longer term. Thinly populated and very wealthy, Qatar and the UAE are obviously in the strongest category (although people do have grievances in those countries as well).

This taxonomy is, however, not just highly debatable, but also highly fluid. Authority can be lost very easily and quickly as was shown in Egypt. Hesitation in the face of protests or overreaction can have an impact on attitudes toward even a fairly popular leader on the street and more critically inside the regime. Moreover, regardless of which category I have placed a regime in, most if not all will need to draw lessons from the events in Tunisia and Egypt and elsewhere in the region. Even if regimes initially rely on repression to ride out protests, many will need to renegotiate the social, economic and even political bargains they have with their people. This won't necessarily result in genuine processes of democratisation, but it may improve consultation (at least for a while), and perhaps even see some effort at income redistribution (at least in those countries that can afford it). The world's and the region's economic difficulties are not going to go away, however, and if predictions of escalating food crises this year are correct then the pressure for new economic bargains will be stronger than the ability of regimes to respond to them.

Finally and most importantly, regimes in the region will need to find a place for the re-politicisation I have spoken of here to go – particularly amongst the youth. These new energies and interest in political participation will not be corralled on Facebook. The smarter regimes will do things to harness it, whether by making parliamentary elections fairer (where they are held) or by coming up with new participatory mechanisms or consultative bodies. The more expedient will rely on repressive methods, although even if this works it will come at a price. There has been a consistent pattern in the modern history of the Middle East whereby brutalised oppositionists go on to become radicals and extremists. The greatest incubator of militancy in the Middle East has not been the mosque or the militant camp, but regime prisons. The current wave of political ferment in the region is new in many ways, but treated with old methods it could just as easily produce old outcomes.

About the Author

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Before joining the Lowy Institute, Anthony was an officer in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) for some thirteen years. He has served in Australian diplomatic missions in Saudi Arabia and Israel, and was Senior Middle East Analyst with the Office of National Assessments from 1996 to 1998. From 2002 to 2003 he was a Director on the Australian government's Iraq Task Force. Immediately prior to joining the Lowy Institute, Anthony was DFAT's Senior Speechwriter.

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