

# Was the Arab Spring a Regional Response to Globalisation?

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### **To what extent can the 'Arab Spring' be explained as a regional response to the pressures of globalisation?**

On the 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010 Muhammad Buazizi lit a match which sparked a series of uprisings across the Middle East, collectively termed the 'Arab Spring'. This nomenclature has since proved controversial, critiqued for its general and distortive phraseology. The events have also been termed the 'Arab Uprising', the 'Arab Awakening' and most recently the 'Arab Winter'. The uprisings were, in reality, not pan-Arab; just six out of twenty-two Arab League member states experienced actual upheaval, with a further ten countries expressing low level activism. Thus there is a clear absence of any domino effect (Fakhro 2011). This essay will utilise the term 'Arab Spring' but will stress the importance of country-specific contexts in engaging in analysis of causality. The events will also be examined alongside the global unrest evident in protests throughout 2011 sparked by what critics have termed the failure of capitalism, namely the global recession, the onset of the Euro crisis and ensuing austerity measures.

For the purpose of this essay globalisation will be evaluated as the process whereby 'in many different fields, the world is drawing together as a single society, marked by common institutions and organisations, by a shared culture and consciousness' (Lechner and Boli 2005, p.xv). This essay will examine the effects of increased globalism by examining the wider context of the uprisings both within and beyond the Middle East region to locate the effects of globalisation on economic, political, cultural and democratic platforms. Finally, this essay will argue that although the peripheral incorporation of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region into active processes of globalisation exacerbated existing inequalities and economic hardships; the Arab Spring was a series of national responses to anachronistic regimes and domestic conditions catalysed but not created by the pressures of globalisation.

The Middle East uprisings escaped predication. Jack Goldstone (2011, p.10) argues that '[t]he degree of a sultan's weakness is often only visible in retrospect' due in part to the nature of the military-security complex common across Middle East states. The survival of a particular leader is often dependent on the loyalty of its armed forces and vice versa. National armies are closely affiliated with leading state figures and play an important position within state regimes. In Tunisia and Egypt the armed forces supported the uprising and successfully overthrew the incumbent leadership. Arguably however, only in Libya was revolution achieved. Goldstone states that for a revolution to succeed a number of following principles must be adhered to: the government must be considered a threat to the country's future, elites (including the military) must be unwilling to defend the state, a widely-representative section of society must mobilise, and international powers must either refuse to protect the government, or intervene. Therefore with the exception of Libya, and due to an absence of international intervention, the uprisings on the whole fail to constitute a revolution.

Six Arab countries: Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Libya, Bahrain and Yemen, have experienced various levels of critical unrest which for many continues to this day. Political scientists Elham Fakhro and Emile Hokayem (2011, p.21) have ascribed the emergence of such civil unrest to the significant furtherance of 'individual empowerment and collective action', which has in turn strengthened civil society and its relationship to government. The Middle East was generally judged to be politically stable and the events of the Arab Spring widely surprised academics who had failed

# Was the Arab Spring a Regional Response to Globalisation?

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to predict or anticipate potential regional unrest. This was due largely to the strength of the military-security complex and continued authoritarian dominance of the heads of state, many of whom had adopted effective techniques of coercion, cooption and containment. The uprisings were spontaneous, the lack of international collusion and the dominance of 'indigenous economic, political, and social factors whose dynamics are extremely hard to forecast' created an unpredictable climate (Gregory Game 2011, p.82). The protests were not fuelled by ideology but were driven by socio-economic grievances and political frustrations. The Tunisian uprising emerged from indigent rural areas mobilised through labour movements targeting social hierarchies. Conversely, Egyptian unrest centred on demands for political reform and was fuelled by disaffected urban youth, a far cry from the armed rebels who instigated the violent uprisings in Libya which eventually led to UN diplomatic and military intervention (Lisa Anderson 2011). The importance of country-specific contexts highlights the 'national pride and the notable sovereign identity of the citizens that revolted' (Albayaa 2011). This intranational mobilisation challenged concepts of border-transcending global citizenship promoted by processes of globalisation. The disparate beginnings of the uprisings highlight their failure to constitute a coordinated trans-border revolution either in response to or inspired by globalisation. Rather, as Olivier Roy states:

'For the first time in the Arab world, revolution has not attached itself to some grand, supranational cause ... [t]hese movements are patriotic rather than nationalist, taking root in a domestic context and confronting the authorities without accusing them of being puppets of a foreign power' (2012b, p. 2).

Foreign powers have a historic presence in the Middle East; following World War I the region was divided into artificial states under British and French imperial rule. These states were governed as European colonies until they were granted independence in the 1940s. Today western powers, most notably the US, retain considerable influence within the Middle East region. This influence is reinforced by the increased entrenchment of globalisation, promoting western economic and political agendas. Proponents of globalisation promote its potential to provide a freer and more equitable world, however academics such as Najjar (2005) have questioned whether the Arab World is ready to embrace globalisation. A series of UNDP Arab Human Development Reports published periodically since 2002 have disclosed 'serious deficits in personal freedoms, gender equality, governance and knowledge across the region' (Fakhro 2011, p. 22). This suggests that some areas in the Middle East lack basic levels of development which are necessary foundations for positive integration into global systems. As Sen (Lechner and Boli 2005, p.20) argues, 'the central issue of contention is not globalisation itself ... [but with the] very unequal sharing of the benefits'. Unequal incorporation into processes of globalisation creates localised disadvantaged areas, or in the case of the Middle East aggravates existing deficits.

Academics such as Jeffrey Haynes (2010) query the assumption that the Middle East desires to become globalised. Amartya Sen (Lechner and Boli 2005, p.16) argues that 'globalisation is often seen as global Westernisation' thus posing a potential threat to Islam. Contemporary political relations with the West are complex. The US in particular has consistently undermined its position in the MENA region. Following 9/11 US-led coalitions invaded both Afghanistan and Iraq leading to both international warfare and long periods of occupation. It also has strong diplomatic ties with Israel, providing high levels of overseas aid to protect democratic institutions. Moreover, The US government has been accused of propping up unpopular governments, labelling anachronistic and obsolescent regimes as 'moderate' in order to secure foreign policy objectives in the region (Fakhro 2011). It is interesting to note that these more 'progressive' and 'moderate' regimes of the Middle East experienced the most destabilising uprisings, influenced in part by economic hardships aggravated by incomplete integration into the global free market capitalist system. Nonetheless it is important not to overstate the pressures of globalisation in generating the Arab Spring. In addition to these pressures the Middle East also experienced positive processes of globalisation as increased integration strengthened social development in the region encouraging political and economic liberalisation and stimulating market-led economic efficiency. Overall the results of globalisation were largely mixed. Haynes (2010) suggests that the Middle East had a variegated response to globalisation which encouraged stronger national and international institutions whilst failing to protect the region from market liberalisation. This in turn produced the environment for the severe economic hardship that would eventually spark the revolutions.

The Arab Spring has been compared to other historic revolutionary movements. It has been suggested that the events were foreshadowed by the 2009 Iranian Green Movement, or inspired by movements such as the 2005

# Was the Arab Spring a Regional Response to Globalisation?

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Prague Spring (Dalacoura 2010). For some analysts the revolution was part of wider global protests which marked 2011 'the year of indignation' (Harris 2011). The Arab Spring erupted alongside unrest across Europe and the global north: with protests throughout Greece, Italy and Spain canvassing against harsh austerity measures and campaigns in Israel targeting inflated living costs. Demonstrations and protests were also active across the global south demanding an increase in social spending in Chile and an end to corruption in India (Harris 2011). In August violent riots spread across London and Occupy Wall Street protests gripped both the US and UK in September and October respectively. These uprisings were neither coordinated nor collaborative but shared a common motive in their expression of outrage over widening inequalities entrenched by the spread of global capitalism and unbalanced and exclusionary free market mechanisms (Harris 2011). The demographics of protestors across the Arab Spring and these numerous popular revolts were similar; driven by disillusioned youth defending their freedoms and asserting their indignation.

The global 2011 protests were largely related to grievances produced or antagonised by systems of globalisation and unprotected exposure to imbalanced free market mechanisms. In January 2012 UK PM David Cameron conceded '[w]e know there is every difference in the world between a market that works and one that does not. Markets can fail. Uncontrolled globalisation can slide into monopolisation, sweeping aside the small, the personal, the local' (Conservative Party 2012). The impact of globalisation is thus significant for weaker global players such as the Middle East whose export economies lack diversification and competitive advantage in markets dominated by hegemonic powers. David Harvey (LeVine 2005, p.396) argues that globalisation is imperialism manifest. In the Middle East this has led to adverse incorporation into global markets. Economic reforms within the region were for the most part illusory with neoliberal reforms exacerbating economic inequalities, fostering cronyism and corruption within national leadership and creating widespread disaffection. In applying Washington Consensus reforms, Arab states 'embraced [the] language rather than spirit of modernisation' (Fakhro 2011, p.28). Kamrava (2004 p.96) argues that integration into economic globalisation was limited due to both 'indigenous and exogenous factors' including authoritarian political leadership, the underdevelopment of domestic markets and a lack of technological capabilities. However, significant economic reforms were successfully implemented and subsequently foreign direct investment (FDI) grew, bureaucracies shrank, state enterprises privatised, government expenditure reduced and subsidies were expunged (Game 2011). These reforms generated significant but inequitable national economic growth which increased national inequalities and grossly enriched Sultanistic dictators and their patrons, the ruling elite. For example, in Egypt President Mubarak amassed an astonishing private fortune, with a value-estimate between \$40 billion and \$70 billion (Goldstone 2011).

In the face of elite enrichment and as a result of the peripheral integration into global markets the economic malaise of the poor persisted with high levels of unemployment, low wages and rising food costs. High unemployment was particularly prevalent amongst the rising numbers of young people. Since 1990 the population aged between 15 and 29 has increased by 50% in Tunisia and Libya, 65% in Egypt and 125% in Yemen, creating a significant lack of employment opportunities and leading to mass disillusionment (Goldstone 2011). Statist authoritarian regimes curtailed levels of global integration to protect the region from the perceived threats of globalisation such as the erosion of state sovereignty. The benefits of globalisation therefore bypassed the wider population, reinforcing elite networks and the personalisation of power and thus failing to encourage greater equity. Sultanistic dictators, such as Mubarak, arranged national agendas around a personal consolidation of power, ensuring that the mass population remained depoliticised, disorganised and ineffectual (Goldstone, p.?). Dalacoura (2010, p.67) suggests that '[m]ore than anything else, the rebellions were a call for dignity and a reaction to being humiliated by arbitrary, unaccountable and increasingly predatory tyrannies'. Globalisation failed to fulfil its inflated expectations as elites ensured that its benefits remained tightly within their grasp. It is important to note that corruption and cronyism were not products of globalisation but manifest to the entrenchment of illiberal political structures, adverse to both liberalism and equity. These long-standing socio-economic conditions catalysed by a peripheral incorporation into globalised structures laid the seeds of political activism.

The principles of globalisation help to promote the spread of democracy, an issue central to western political agendas and at the heart of the Arab Spring. The Middle East uprisings demanded greater democratic representation for their people in the form of democracy, pluralism and good governance. Did this however constitute as a regional response to globalism? Globalisation promotes a western-constructed institutionalised concept of

## Was the Arab Spring a Regional Response to Globalisation?

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democracy that differs from Middle Eastern democratic ideas, which do not necessarily incorporate the same structures or systems. Roberto Alboni (2011, p.9) argues that proponents of global democracy 'do not grasp that what democracy means today is more freedom from the West', rather than increased political affiliation and systemic structural homogeneity with western hegemonic powers. The procurement of democratic freedoms is seen instead as an assertion of national identity and freedoms and as a move away from western influence rather than towards it. Western intervention in the region has promoted the spread of democratic institutions, but as Gregory Game asserts (2011, p.9) '[t]he United States will have a hard time supporting democracy in one Arab country, such as Egypt, while standing by other allies, such as Bahrain, crush peaceful democratic protests'. Such diplomatic alliances have significantly undermined the role of the US in the promotion of global democracy leading protestors to push for home-grown democracy which reflects Middle Eastern regional ideals rather than hegemonic constructs.

It is too premature to forecast how the Middle East regimes will develop in the long-term. Nonetheless it is clear that any democratic processes will be internally constructed rather than exported. Through processes of globalisation protestors have been exposed to western democratic structures and ideals but have sought to learn from them rather than to replicate them. Jeffrey Haynes (2010, p.134) argues that processes of globalisation are irrelevant in preparing the Middle East for democracy due to the region's incompatible political and structural characteristics. Olivier Roy (2012a) states that this is reaffirmed by the onset of the 'Arab Winter', illustrative of the Middle East's incompatibility with western democratic concepts.

For much of the Arab Middle East there has been little sign of democratic transition, state leaders have remained in power and regimes have stood resolute. In both Morocco and Jordan, uprisings were quickly and successfully repressed and in Syria and Bahrain unpopular rulers remain in power. Thus far, only Libya, Yemen, Tunisia and Egypt have impelled leadership change and only Tunisia and Libya have achieved regime change alongside this. Elections in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia have produced Islamist victors, a further rejection of western democratic ideals which divorces politics from religion, a matter far more complicated in the Middle East. Roy (2012a) however argues that democracy does not by necessity infer secularisation and suggests that Islamic political parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood protect important collective religious freedoms. This aligns with Jeffrey Haynes' (2010) contention that, in opposition to western liberal democratic ideals based on individuals, Islamic ideology upholds the good of the collective community (p.148). Essentially, Islamic parties are on the whole extremely conservative and are increasingly ideologically challenged by an encroaching democratic arena which creates 'legitimacy in the eyes of the people' (2012a). Ultimately therefore, democracy is in the hands of the people.

Mark LeVine (2005, p.395) argues that 'in the absence of a truly worldwide economic or political integration culture has become, perhaps, the most powerful driving force behind how globalisation is experienced today'. These processes have enforced a 're-articulation of Islam under globalising conditions' (Lechner and Boli 2005, p.332). Many Middle East Arab states fear that globalisation will promote worldwide secularism and negatively impact Islam. The events of 9/11 and subsequent western military intervention in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) sparked renewed fears over western domination and forced regime change. Globalisation also represents a challenge to the Islamic faith by the hegemonic Christian West (Najjar 2005). Some groups of Arab Muslims fear an imposition of cultural homogeneity centred on western ideals of capitalism, consumption and materialism which represents a significant threat to the 'Islamic Personality' and its principles of Sharia law. LeVine (2005, p.402) suggests that cultural responses to globalisation were channelled through an emergence of 'politicised Islam' in social arenas. Notwithstanding its cultural and political significance, the 'Islamic Personality' had little to do with the Arab uprisings, which lacked faith-based or religious motives. The leaderless quality of the uprisings also suggests a lack of ideological triggers. Dalacoura (2010, p.75) concludes that 'the uprisings were firmly focused on domestic, national issues, to which the rival concerns of Arabism and Islam were secondary'. With approaching elections in Egypt and the ascendancy of the Muslim Brotherhood Islamist parties are becoming increasingly more powerful and influential; however they played no major role in the origins of the Arab Spring.

The impact of cultural globalisation on the Middle East also affected regional and inter-regional communications through increased technological and communication transfers. Instruments such as digital television channels, most notably Al-Jazeera, and internet forums such as social networking sites Facebook and Twitter have been highlighted as progressive means for national mobilisation. Some academics such as Tony Benn (2011, p.1) have suggested

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that these forums, '[made] possible popular revolutions that would never have taken place had this information not been available'. It is clear that the utilisation of social media is illustrative of the effects of globalisation on the Middle East region however it is important not to overstate their impact. The internet and digital television broadcasts provided a significant platform for the coordination and mobilisation of protestors, but these forums acted alongside traditional means of association, rather than replacing them. The use of Twitter and Facebook challenged the monopolies of state-controlled information and brought the uprisings into the living rooms of social media users across the world. This is not to say however that Twitter, Facebook, mobile technology or any other globalised commodity gave rise to the Arab Spring. In countries such as Syria only 17% of the population have access to the internet, access to which was also blocked periodically by state apparatus. Furthermore social media was equally employed by conservative elements and was used as an effective system of monitoring activities (Dalacoura 2010). As Paul Mason (2010) asserts, the significant point is not that they use it but what they used it for. Alongside the usage of social media traditional forms of association remained dominant and existing networks and meeting places such as the Mosque remained critical to the organisation of events (Fakhro and Hokayen 2011).

In summary, it is clear the Arab Spring was not a unified revolution but a series of national uprisings in response to regional intranational socio-economic grievances. Less than one-third of Arab League member states experienced significant unrest, undermining claims that the events constituted a regional rebellion. The events were driven by sovereign concerns and did not reflect a pan-Arab or Muslim character; in fact the uprisings were devoid of any overarching ideology specific rather to domestic grievances. Regional economic troubles were however entrenched by the Middle East's peripheral integration into the globalised economy. The uprisings were not predominantly a product of globalisation itself but a manifestation of the resulting rise in inequalities mishandled by sovereign powers.

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