

The Arab Spring: Broken Dreams By Zaina Taha

What was the Arab Spring?

The Arab Spring was a series of demonstrations and revolutions across the Middle East and North Africa from 2010 to 2012 that demanded a shift from authoritarian rule to democracy as a response to the decades of totalitarian regimes that controlled the region. It was initially sparked on December 17th, 2010, after the self-immolation of a Tunisian street vendor, Mohammad Bouazizi, in protest of the government's arbitrary refusal to allow him to sell his goods and provide for his family, symbolic of the country's ongoing oppression at the time (Lageman). His demands and actions reverberated across Tunisia, leading to the Jasmine Revolution and, eventually, the resignation of the long-time president, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. This change inspired the rest of the Arab world to follow in Bouazizi's footsteps in seeking an end to dictatorial rule. However, while the Tunisian protests brought about change in Tunisia, they were unable to do so in other Arab countries, affecting not only the peace and stability in the Middle East, with full-scale civil wars occurring in several countries, but that of the rest of the world as well. The Middle East is a flashpoint for many conflicts involving foreign powers, including the 9/11 attacks, the Iraq War, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, showcasing how the stability of the world is heavily dependent on that of the Middle East. The Middle East is additionally an important region due to its vast energy reserves, which the majority of the world depends on, meaning that instability in the Middle East can have a significant impact on the world economy. Due to the inability of the other nations to execute reform, Tunisia is currently the sole democratic country in the Arab world, raising questions about the flaws and shortcomings of the Arab Spring that hindered democracy. The Arab Spring failed to bring about democracy in the Middle East due to a lack of autonomous working-class strength, foreign intervention, and the involvement of Islamic fundamentalism.

The Lack of Autonomous Working-Class Strength

One of the major factors that contributed to the failure of the Arab Spring was the lack of autonomous working-class strength. The dictators of the Middle Eastern countries had many Communist-inspired ideas that were strategically planned in order to maintain power over their respective countries. One of these ideas included a deal they offered to the masses that would

limit their ability to exert independence: to give up their collective bargaining and trade unions in exchange for financial security. Many Middle Easterners were in desperate need of a secure supply of resources, as evidenced by a Carnegie article, “How Poverty and Inequality Are Devastating the Middle East”, “...has for decades left the Arab region with tens of millions of semi-educated young people without steady jobs or steady income, languishing without hope in the dead-end informal labor market and politically impotent” and were left with no choice but to surrender their trade unions (Khouri). As a result, without a means of protecting and furthering their rights, citizens were unable to organize and form a cohesive voice, leaving the countries in leadership vacuums. Tunisia, on the other hand, had a history of organizing structures and was able to form and maintain labor unions, such as the Tunisian General Trade Union, as they refused to surrender their ability to voice their rights. This is evidenced by the words of a journalist in a Jacobin interview, Anand Gopal, who had gone to the Middle East during the Arab Spring, stating:

There were activists and militants in the UGTT who tried every step of the way to democratize it, to fight for union democracy, to fight for accountability. They were building power within the UGTT, so that when a moment of opportunity arose, when the uprising took place, they were able to move on that (Gopal).

It is because of these trade unions, which even played a role in Tunisia’s independence from France in 1956, that the Tunisians developed the organizational skills and experience to lead a successful revolution (Beinin). This lack of independent working-class strength played a role in the failure of the Arab Spring protests, as they limited the citizens’ ability to exert their independence and form a cohesive voice.

Foreign Intervention

The second major factor that contributed to the failure of the Arab Spring had been the foreign interventions in the Middle East that prevented the protests from achieving their desired goals. These interventions can be viewed from two angles: the anti-democratic and democratic forces.

The anti-democratic forces that intervened in the Middle East contributed significantly to maintaining the totalitarian status quo. This can be seen in the Russian interference in Syria, which supplied the president, Bashar al-Assad, with military support (Chotiner). As a result,

Russia was able to brutally crush the Arab Spring rebellions, as well as instill in citizens fear of speaking out against the dictatorship, and they were instead subdued into a silent acquiescence to the authoritarian system. This is evidenced through an article entitled “What Bashar al-Assad Wants” by the New Yorker, which states:

That’s where the chemical weapons come in. They’re lethal and efficient. And they did what they were intended to do. The offensive against Douma is proceeding, with Assad offering the rebels and residents there a choice of evacuation by bus, or probably death or imprisonment if they stay. It’s not a pretty picture (Filkins).

However, Russia was not the only country that helped crush pro-democracy protests in Syria. China also extended its political influence to the Middle East during the Arab Spring, vetoing several attempts at the United Nations Security Council to punish Assad for his tyrannical rule in Syria, thus contributing to the continuation of his repressive regime (Phillips). This is additionally seen through Saudi Arabia’s intervention in Bahrain to assist the government in putting a halt to the Arab Spring protests. These Saudi Arabian forces enforced a brutal crackdown, with their military squashing protests and preventing any opposition to the government (McEvers).

The refusal of democratic forces to intervene in the Middle East also played a role in preventing the rise of democracy. This can be seen through the United States’ reluctance to interfere in the Middle East after the negative consequences that previous conflicts, such as the War on Terror and the Iraq War, left for the country. As stated in an article entitled “Arab Spring: When the US Needed to Step Up, It Stood Back” by The Conversation, the United States was “fearful of getting bogged down in the Middle East” (Bentley). For example, following the toppling of Mu'ammar Al-Qadhdhāfi in Libya, the United States had the opportunity to intervene and help the democratic forces fill the power vacuum, however, refrained, and Libya consequently descended into chaos (Daragahi). On the other hand, many progressive voices, such as Noam Chomsky, claim that democratic countries, such as the United States, refrained from playing a part in removing dictatorial control in the Middle East out of their own self-interest. The United States has traditionally dealt with dictatorial regimes in the Middle East, as it is easier to exert influence by swaying the dictators to their own whims. On the other hand, dealing with democratically elected governments can prove to be complicated as there is no one

person to deal with. Additionally, democratically elected governments are answerable to their own people and are not beholden to foreign powers.

These foreign interventions by democratic and non-democratic forces played a role in the failure of the Arab Spring protests, as they maintained the status quo of a totalitarian government.

The Involvement of Islamist Fundamentalism

Finally, the third major factor that contributed to the failure of the Arab Spring had been the involvement of forces of Islamic fundamentalism. In many countries, fundamentalist groups such as ISIS came into being due to power vacuums. By convincing citizens that they would remove dictators, these organizations acquired the support of the masses who were desperate to oust the dictators. It is worthy to note, however, that these fundamentalist organizations did not acquire power through violence, but rather through a combination of strategic exploitation of the lack of leadership within the democratic forces, as well as through their extensive social welfare programs. This is recounted in an interview of a Tunisian man, in the article, “Arab Spring After 10 Years: Understanding Islam, Democracy and Western Imperialism” stating:

I asked him how someone who imbibes so freely can vote for an Islamist Party. Without missing a beat he told me that he had been jailed by Ben Ali for five years and during that time the only organization that gave his family money was Al-Nahda. The party while underground established networks of social aid that kept many poor families alive (“Arab Spring after 10 Years: Understanding Islam, Democracy and Western Imperialism”).

Once these fundamentalist groups made inroads through these strategic tactics, however, they ruthlessly seized control of sizable territories, leaving even less possibility for civilian autonomy. As a result, the dictators were reduced to the lesser of the two evils, providing them with the justification to be the ones to be supported. Eventually, these Islamic fundamentalist groups instilled such a significant amount of fear in the masses that they began to scale back their demands, preventing the emergence of democracy within the region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while the Arab Spring protests were able to bring about a transformative shift in the government of Tunisia, they were unable to do so in other Arab countries due to a

lack of autonomous working-class strength, foreign intervention, and the involvement of Islamist fundamentalism. Rather, it has engulfed numerous countries, such as Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon, in full-fledged civil wars that are still raging today, leaving thousands of individuals either dead, severely injured, or displaced (Byman). Detractors, including political leaders, journalists, and scholars specializing in the region, may argue that the cultural and religious norms of the Middle East were incompatible with democracy and, therefore, the protests were destined to fail. However, in actuality, many Arabs had the desire for democracy and were willing to make sacrifices to ensure its establishment within the region; it was only the political and institutional pitfalls outlined in this paper that ultimately failed them. However, although the majority of the protests proved to be unsuccessful, the Arab Spring has inspired hope for the prospect of democracy in the Middle East in the near future. The protestors' sheer courage and perseverance in seeking to create a change in their country is the first step toward a successful revolution, and Tunisia's example alone proves that democracy in the Middle East is possible. Ultimately, it proves that if individuals are impassioned enough, there is hope for piecing together the shattered remains of broken dreams.

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