CONTENTIOUS POLITICS AND SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSITIONS

A new wave of Arab Uprisings

What have both Arab protesters and European policymakers learned from the Arab Spring?

Georges Fahmi



Illustrator: Carole Hénaff

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has witnessed over the last couple of years a new wave of popular uprisings. Protesters have taken to the streets in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon calling for political change and raising again the 2011 famous slogan: “the People want to bring down the regime”. This new wave shares similarities with the 2011 uprisings, but it has also its own characteristics, as protest movements have learnt from the previous wave’s mistakes to review its demands and change its strategies. This article looks at this second wave of the Arab Spring, the similarities it shares with the 2011 wave, but also how its demands and strategies have developed, and how European policymakers could learn from their response to the first wave when addressing this second one.

A second wave of the Arab Spring?

Four Arab countries have witnessed since late 2018 a new wave of popular protests calling for political change.

In Sudan, the protest movement started as a reaction to an increase in the price of bread in December 2018, eventually escalating into political demands for regime change. Although the Sudanese president, Omar al-Bashir, promised economic and political reforms to calm down the protest movement, protestors continued their mobilization calling for him to step down. The military interfered to oust him in April 2019, after 30 years in power. In Algeria too, protesters took to the streets in February 2019 in objection to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term. Under pressure from the protests, Bouteflika dropped his plan to run again and proposed postponing the elections while political reforms are implemented. However, these concessions were not enough for the protesters. The protest movement continued demanding for his resignation, until he decided finally to step down in April 2019, after nearly 20 years in power. In October 2019, Iraqi and Lebanese protesters took to the streets to contest their corrupt sectarian regimes. However, their struggle is more complicated, as the two sectarian political regimes have no clear center of authority, unlike the case in Algeria and Sudan. Nevertheless, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri and his Iraq counterpart Adel Abdul Mahdi decided to resign in response to the demands of the protesters.

The widespread protests in the four countries have brought back memories of the Arab uprisings that swept the MENA region in 2011, leading scholars and practitioners to ask whether we are dealing with a second wave of the Arab Spring. Indeed, this wave of protests shares various features with the 2011 popular uprisings.

> The new wave of popular uprisings shares similarities with the 2011 events, but they have learnt from the previous wave's mistakes

First, these protests are nationwide. In the four countries, these ongoing protests are spread across different cities, and are not just limited to one geographical area, even in the case of Lebanon and Iraq, where both countries are geographically divided along sectarian lines. In Lebanon, tens of thousands of protesters formed a human chain running from Tripoli in the north, to Tyre in the south across the entire country in a symbol for their unity against the sectarian regime. [1] In Iraq, protesters focused on the capital, Baghdad, and the southern governorates. Still, protesters from the Sunni governorates came to join the protests in Tahrir square in Baghdad.

Second, the protesters have been able to sustain their activities over a long period of time. In Sudan, the protests lasted for five months until Bashir was ousted by the military, and it

continued for another four months until an agreement to share power during the transitional period was reached between revolutionary groups and the military in August 2019. In Algeria, the protest movement lasted for about two months before Bouteflika stepped down and continued afterwards until the COVID-19 crisis. In both Iraq and Lebanon, Covid-19 has put on halt the protest movements for a few months, yet the wave of contention has resumed as protesters have remobilized on several instances to voice their grievances and discontent with ruling governing powers.

Third, this wave of protests is political in nature. It shares the same political demands as that of 2011 evidenced by its slogans, 'Just fall that is all' in Sudan and 'No to the fifth mandate' in Algeria, "all means all" in Lebanon as well as other slogans borrowed from 2011, including the famous one " The People want to bring down the regime".

And, finally, as was the case in 2011, these four protest movements are being influenced by each other. the important breakthrough achieved by the Algerian protest movement in pushing Bouteflika not to seek a fifth mandate has given more power to the protest movement in Sudan, which had been showing some signs of exhaustion. The protests movements in both Iraq and Lebanon have closely drawn on each other insofar as their strategies and tactics are concerned, as they have been faced with the same type of sectarian regime. For instance, protesters in Beirut and Baghdad have been sending signs of support to one another. It is also worth noting that the new wave of protests has been closely followed by politically active young people in other countries across the region as well, inspiring discussions on youth political participation and engagement.

What is new about this new wave of Arab uprisings?

Despite the four similarities that the second wave of uprisings shares with the previous one, it has four key characteristics that distinguish it from the previous cycle of contention.

First, it reflects a much deeper societal support for freedom and justice. Unlike the case in 2011, where protesters have been motivated by the Tunisian model of a peaceful and smooth political transition, this wave of protests erupted despite the disastrous outcomes of the Arab Spring in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. While many believed that the call for change in the region has died, Sudanese, Algerian, Lebanese, and Iraqi protesters have proven that people are still willing to risk their lives to see political change. This is even more the case as this second wave enjoys less international support than the first one received back in January 2011.

> This wave seeks to change the rules of the game, not just the players, and demands to go beyond procedural democracy so as to achieve broader and deeper changes

Second, this new wave is not targeting only those in power, but it seeks mainly to change the political rules of the game. Unlike in 2011, when protesters left the squares after their respective presidents resigned or were ousted, as was the case in Egypt after Mubarak had stepped down, Sudanese protesters continued to demonstrate after Bashir had left office and until a deal was reached between the opposition and the Transitional Military Council over how to manage the transitional period. In Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon, protests have continued despite the resignation of the Algerian president and both the Lebanese and the Iraqi prime ministers. This wave is less about names, and more about the systems they represent.

Third, the demands of this wave go beyond political rights and extend to deep socioeconomic reforms. Protesters are calling for profound socio-economic changes that go beyond shifting rules and norms in political offices and institutions. In fact, rushed elections have been perceived by many protesters as a trick to put an end to their popular mobilization. In Sudan, the agreement between the revolutionary forces and the Military Council postponed the elections until after the end of a three-year transitional period. In Algeria too, protesters took to the streets every Friday to demonstrate against the authorities' decision to hold presidential elections in December 2019. According to the fifth wave of the Arab Barometer, the economic situation and corruption are perceived as the main challenge for Algerians (62.2%), Sudanese (67.8%), Lebanese (57.9%), and Iraqis (50.2%), while democracy is perceived as the main challenge for only 2.3%, 3.9%, 5% and 1.4% respectively. [2] The experience of the Arab Spring has shown to people that democratic measures are only a means to an end.

And forth, unlike the case of the first wave of uprisings where some protesters have resorted to violence as is the case in Syria and Libya, this wave has been so far mostly non-violent. Security forces, party militias and thugs have cracked down on protesters in Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon. Yet protesters have insisted to a great extent on the non-violent approach of their strategies. In Sudan, protesters responded to the massacre outside of the General Command of the Armed Forces on 3 June 2019 by organizing a mass demonstration on 30 June, which put pressure on the military to resume talks with the revolutionary forces. In Iraq too, protesters have responded to the targeted assassinations of political activists by calling for more popular pressure on the government until the criminals be brought to justice. Ongoing protest movements have learned from the decision of the revolutionary groups in Syria to take up arms, and there is consensus that resorting to violent strategies would offer authoritarian regimes the chance to reframe the political uprisings as civil war, as did the Syrian regime.

So far, this wave reflects a much deeper societal support for freedom and justice as it seeks to change the rules of the game, not just the players. Further it demands to go beyond procedural democracy so as to achieve broader and deeper socio-economic changes. To that end, as underscored, protesters have to a great extent anchored their strategies in non-violence.

What could European policymakers learn from the experience of 2011?

In their first summit in Sharm El-Sheikh in February 2019, Leaders of the European Union (EU) and the League of Arab States (LAS) agreed to cooperate to achieve shared objectives. The list of these objectives includes: strengthen the fight against irregular migration, strengthen cooperation on security, conflict resolution and socio-economic development throughout the region, reaffirm the importance to strengthen economic cooperation between the two sides, and establish a strong partnership based on investment and sustainable development [3].

Nonetheless, the summit that came three months after the beginning of the Sudanese uprising, and during the first days of the Algerian Hirak failed to refer to any of these popular mobilizations in its 17 points' final statement. In fact, the title of the EU-LAS summit summarizes the EU approach towards the region: "Investing in Stability".

> Europe has been perceived by the people of the MENA region as favoring authoritarian stability over democratic political change

Europe has been perceived by the people of the MENA region as favoring authoritarian stability over democratic political change. The 2014 ArabTrans surveys shows for instance that people in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia have a low opinion of the EU's claims to be a normative actor, to facilitate democratization and development or even to be a force for stability in their region. TheseAdditional surveys found that the Arab publics believed the EU to be more interested in stabilizing its borders and protecting its own security. Only a third of respondents thought that the EU has had a positive impact on the development of democracy in their countries. [4]

The experience of the first wave, particularly in Libya and Syria has led many European policymakers to think twice before showing their support for any call for political change in the region. Moreover, since 2011, right-wing parties have increased their share in power in several Western countries, which have prioritized issues of migration and counterterrorism at home over supporting political freedom abroad. Many of the European policymakers have reached the conclusion that authoritarian regimes that can prevent violent radicalization and illegal migration serve their interests better than movements of contestation and opposition that would weaken state capacities to manage these threats.

They are right. Authoritarian regimes are better equipped to help protect European interests, than often weak elected regimes that are navigating a fragile democratic transition. However, what they got wrong is that while these regimes might be able to control violent radicalization and to deter undocumented migration to Europe, these regimes' policies embody the main causes aggravating those challenges in the first place.

Once these political regimes lose control, Europe will be then faced with much bigger and multilayered challenges that have been gaining in salience and intensity beneath this façade of stability.

Violent radicalization and the so-called phenomenon of “illegal migration” are not the direct products of the Arab Spring. Moments of transition only unleashed these challenges that have been building up in light of prevalent policies. The example of violent radicalization in Tunisia offers a case in point. Since 2011, Tunisia has been facing a wave of violent radicalization that goes much deeper than the crisis under the Ben Ali regime has unleashed. Tunisia has been one of the top exporters of Salafi jihadist fighters, with more than 5,500 Tunisians fighting with jihadist groups in Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen as estimated by the United Nations (UN) in 2015 [5]. While some have blamed this wave of radicalization on the transitional period, the main cause for this wave is the Ben Ali authoritarian regime itself.

Ideological radicalization had already taken place under the old regime, particularly in its prisons. As the old regime was brought down in 2011, it was already too late for Salafi jihadists to reconsider their violent doctrine. With the fall of the regime, Salafi jihadists benefited from a general amnesty and were released. However, by then the newly established democratic political environment had little influence on their already rooted extremist ideas. While weak state institutions, in particular the security apparatus during the transitional period, have allowed these radical voices to organize themselves, the process of ideological shift had already taken place under the old regime.

> While authoritarian regimes might offer Europe some stability in the short term, socio-economic grievances and political repression will undoubtedly catalyze violent radicalization

The outcome of the first wave of Arab uprisings resulting in conflict, civil wars, waves of immigrants, and rise in terror has shaped EU policymakers’ attitudes towards this second wave of uprisings. While searching for stability is understandable, supporting a return to authoritarianism is however counterproductive [6]. In fact, it is exactly these authoritarian practices that led to this second wave of Arab uprisings. As shown in the previous section, the protest movements have learned from the mistakes of the first wave of uprisings. European policymakers need to learn from their previous mistakes as well when formulating their response to the current wave of contention. While authoritarian regimes might offer Europe some stability in the short term, beneath this façade, socio-economic grievances coupled with political repression will undoubtedly catalyze violent radicalization and spur people to seek new horizons abroad as their local contexts would be unable to respond to their aspirations and hopes.

Conclusion

The eruption of the protest movements in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon reveals a strong domestic demand for freedom and justice in the region. While many have thought that the Arab Spring had abated, the Sudanese protesters who took to the streets in December 2018 brought back the joyful memories of the first days of 2011. With little media attention and no international support, the wave of contention continued in Sudan, reached Algeria in February 2019, and 8 months later, Iraq and Lebanon. Many voices in the region are still determined to challenge their status-quo and build new political regimes that would guarantee not only their political rights but also bring about deep socio-economic changes. In doing so, these voices are gradually learning from previous mistakes. As underscored, they are no longer satisfied with their presidents and prime ministers leaving power, unlike the case in Egypt when protesters left the square after Mubarak had stepped down in February 2011. What they seek to achieve is a more radical change in the rules of the game, and not only a change in the names of the players. In pursuing their goals, they insist additionally on a non-violent approach. Unlike the cases in Syria and Libya, they learned that resorting to violence would drag their movement into an armed confrontation where authoritarian groups will end up having the upper hand.

On the other shore of the Mediterranean, European policymakers need to learn from their previous mistakes as well. Supporting authoritarian regimes might indeed prevent violent attacks and undocumented migration in the light of these authoritarian regimes' heavy security measures. However socio-economic grievances together with political repression would only lead more people, the youth in particular, to join violent groups or reach out to smuggling networks to leave their countries. The experience of the first wave of the Arab Spring shows clearly this pattern. Despite what seemed to be complete authoritarian stability in Tunisia or Syria, the two countries witnessed a growing wave of radicalization under both Ben Ali and Al-Assad. The Arab Spring has only allowed these radical voices to come to the fore. It has however not created them given that their formation and consolidation are intertwined with longstanding legacies. This second wave of uprisings offers the EU another opportunity to reconsider its policies towards the region. Only by supporting political and socio-economic reforms, can the EU invest in longer-term stability and individual resilience in the region.

REFERENCES

1 — "From Tripoli to Tyre, Lebanese Protesters Form Human Chain across the Country", France 24, 27 October 2019. Available online.
2 — The Fifth Wave of the Arab Barometer 2018-2019. Available online.
3 — The full statement of the Sharm El-Sheikh summit declaration is available online.
4 — ArabTrans/Arab Transformations Project (2016), "What do 'The People' Want? Citizens' Perceptions of Democracy, Development, and EU-MENA Relations in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, and Morocco in 2014", in European Policy Briefs, May 2016, Available online.

5 — OHCHR (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner) (2015) Foreign Fighters: Urgent Measures Needed to Stop Flow from Tunisia-UN expert group warns. 10 July. Tunis/Geneva. Available online.
6 — Shikaki, Kalil. (2020) Stability Vs. Democracy In The Post Arab-Spring: What Choice For The EU?. EU-LISTCO policy papers series No. 4.



Georges Fahmi

Georges Fahmi is a research fellow at the Middle East Directions Programme of the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, at the European University Institute in Fiesole, Italy. Previously, Fahmi was a non-resident scholar at the Carnegie Middle East Centre in Beirut, Lebanon. His research focuses on religious actors in democratic transition in the Middle East, the interplay between state and religion in Egypt and Tunisia, and religious minorities and citizenship in Egypt and Syria.