



THE ARAB SPRING ONE YEAR ON

A year ago the tyrants of the Middle East seemed untouchable. Today, Yemen's President Ali Abdullah Saleh has been ousted, Muammar al-Qaddafi is dead, ex-president Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia has been sentenced to 35 years in absentia, and Hosni Mubarak is on trial. The revolutions shook the foundations of these regimes, but the bigger tests are still to come. The question is will the Arab Spring flourish or will it die a bloody death? OLGA YOLDI writes.

Last January marked the one-year anniversary of the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt that ended the dictatorships of Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak, and triggered the uprisings in the Arab world.

On 17 December 2010, when the Tunisian fruit-seller Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old unemployed graduate living in Sidi Bouzid, had his fruit confiscated by police, he set himself on fire to protest against corruption and injustice.

His death sparked a revolution in his country and triggered the people's revolts that spread like wildfire to neighbouring countries, shaking the foundations of undemocratic, patriarchal and rigid, old systems, ultimately leading to the toppling of four governments and threatening several others. Tunisians celebrated with prudent optimism, amid worries about high unemployment and economic stagnation that have cast a shadow over the revolution's achievements. While economically there is a long way to go, politically at least, Tunisia is on the path towards establishing a real democratic state.

Other nations are still a long way from achieving their revolutionary ideals. In Egypt, the army still rules. It killed protesters, and has placed obstacles designed to preserve its autonomy. In Libya where there was not a revolution but a civil war, the country has been torn apart by clan animosities and divided armed militias.



Opposition supporters pray in the rain March 4, 2011 in Benghazi, Libya. Thousands of protesters gathered for Friday prayers and listened to a call to arms to join the fight against the government forces of leader Muammar al-Qaddafi to the west. PHOTO: JOHN MOORE/GETTY IMAGES.



Libyans load their belongings into a car in a destroyed neighbourhood in Sirte.

PHOTO: PHILIPPE DESMAZES/AFP/
GETTY IMAGES/ OCTOBER 2011

Last March marked the one-year anniversary of the uprising in Syria, where forces loyal to President Bashar al-Assad have forced protesters into an armed insurrection that according to the United Nations has killed more than 8,000 people, mostly civilians. In Yemen where the political situation is far from stable, troops are battling al-Qaeda fighters in the south which remains partly under the control of anti-government groups who seized it more than a year ago.

“One era has ended,” Gamal Banna, one of Islam’s leading liberal thinkers, told *Los Angeles Times*. “But the new era, we don’t know exactly what is taking shape.” According to him, the revolution never found a consistent political voice, nor a comprehensive set of demands. “Young activists and rebels were not enduring enough or enticing enough to seize the moment. They still take to city squares but their race for power has moved beyond them.”

So, where is the Arab Spring leading the Middle East to? It may be too early to say, but some trends are emerging.

For decades the Arab world has been dominated by ageing autocrats and lifelong rulers; Muammar al-Qaddafi took charge of Libya in 1968, the Assad family has ruled Syria since 1970, Ali Abdullah Saleh became president of Yemen in 1978, Hosni Mubarak took charge of Egypt in 1981 and Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali became Tunisia’s president in 1987. These autocrats were able to stay in power by brutally suppressing the people.

Meanwhile, the current monarchies in the Middle East have enjoyed even longer governments, with the Hashemites running Jordan since its creation in 1920, the al-Saud family ruling a unified Saudi Arabia since 1932 and the Alaouite dynasty in Morocco coming to power in the seventeenth century.

These regimes have survived in recent decades despite democratic waves rolling through many other parts of the world. But now they are making reforms in the hope of pre-empting their own popular uprisings.

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Most analysts point at demographic changes, political repression and economic stagnation as the main root-causes of the revolutions.

Emmanuel Todd, a well-known French demographer and social scientist, who predicted the downfall of the Soviet Union and the Arab revolution, attributed the uprisings to demographic change and cultural growth.

“The birth rate has fallen by half in the Arab world in just one generation, from 7.5 children per woman in 1975 to 3.5 in 2005,” Todd told *Der Spiegel*.

“Young adults constitute the majority of the population and unlike their fathers and mothers, they can read and write, but suffer from unemployment and social frustration ... When more than 90 per cent of young people can read and write and have a modicum of education, no traditional authoritarian regime will last for long,” he said.

In recent times social frustration has been increasing with changes in the world economy and requirements of foreign-aid donors that have forced non-oil producing states to modernise their economies.

F. Gregory Gause III wrote recently in the *Foreign Affairs* magazine that “a number of Arab regimes, including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco

and Tunisia, had privatised state enterprises, encouraged foreign investment, created incentives to kick-start the private sector and had cut subsidies and state expenditures that previously consumed government budgets.

“Such Washington consensus-style economic reforms exacerbated inequalities and made life more difficult for the poor,” he noted. According to Gause, it had been believed that economic liberalisation would establish a basis of support for Arab authoritarians and encourage the economic growth necessary to grapple with the challenges, however, these economic reforms backfired.

Whether motivated by political repression, or soaring food and fuel prices, Arab citizens demonstrated their ability to mobilise against their govern-



Syrian President Bashar al-Assad gestures during a joint press conference with his Egyptian counterpart Hosni Mubarak. PHOTO: MARWAN NAAMANI/ AFP/ 2000

ments, and in most cases they succeeded.

The big winners of the revolution so far are the Islamist parties that have won in Tunisia and Egypt and are likely to win in Libya and Yemen.

In Egypt, the Freedom and Justice Party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood won 235 of the 498 elected seats (47 per cent) in the lower house, while the ultra-conservative Al-Nour Salafist party won 25 per cent. That is a stunning Islamist victory following more than 60 years of secular rule. The military, which has come under fire over its human-rights records in recent months and faces accusations of having used Mubarak-era tactics to crush dissent, has pledged to hand the government over to civilian rule when the new president is finally elected at the end of June. But as that time approaches they seem reluctant to relinquish power.

Former US president Jimmy Carter, who met some of the generals last January, said: “The biggest

question that has to be solved is who is going to control the government of Egypt in the future. Is it going to be the military? Or the officials elected by the people?”

Egypt’s transition grew messier when reformer Mohammed ElBaradei, who helped galvanise the demands for democracy, pulled out from the presidential race in protest over the military’s continued hold on power. “The former regime did not fall,” he said, “My conscience does not permit me to run for the presidency or any other official position unless it is within a democratic framework.”

There have been complaints among young revolutionaries that there has not been much talk about bringing in democracy, freedom and social justice, but instead the focus of attention is about new alliances that could allow the ruling military to maintain its domination over the government and Islamists. The military chiefs fear they could be held



Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak meets with Emirates Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed al-Nahayan in Cairo as protests in the city continue for the 15th consecutive day calling for his resignation and an end to his regime. PHOTO: KHALED DESOUKI/ AFP/ FEBRUARY 2011

accountable for the corruption of the old regime, human-rights abuses and the death of at least 100 protesters since they assumed power. They want to secure the Muslim Brotherhood's support to retain some role in government, to avoid prosecution, and keep their own economic interests.

On the other hand, The Brotherhood's willingness to collaborate with the military comes from its realisation that the generals wield massive power and could derail the democratic process that has benefited the Islamists. According to the *Jerusalem Post*, Egypt's army elite is engaged in many profitable businesses, as owners of a vast empire of factories, tourist resorts and real estate developments.

"No one knows the extent of the Egyptian military's economic holdings because successive authoritarian regimes have made sure it was kept secret," Joseph Mayton wrote, "The military wants language in the next constitution that would spare the army any civil-

ian oversight over its budget, its arm deals, its vast business interest and the pay scale for its top brass".

According to Mayton, the military loaned the central bank \$1 billion to help support the sagging Egyptian pound. "The transaction not only pointed out the relative wealth of the two institutions, but also the extent to which the army has access to money beyond the reach of the civilian authorities to whom it is supposed to be reporting."

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The big losers of the revolution so far are the young people, women and members of ethnic minorities, who now feel excluded from the decision-making process.

It is paradoxical that these same young revolu-

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tionaries, mainly liberal progressives, leftists and socialists, who risked their lives and were instrumental in toppling the autocrats, will not have much of a role in the new government. Young people and women are saying the revolution remains unfinished, that change will remain lacking and failing as long as they are not at the core of decision-making. But this is unlikely to happen as long as the Brotherhood remains in power.

The Muslim Brotherhood has been involved in politics since 1928. It was founded by the Islamic scholar and school teacher Hasan al-Banna, who was raised in a village but went to Cairo as a young man, and believed the increasing westernisation of Arabic society was a source of decadence and decay.

In the wake of the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate at the end of WWI, fearing Muslims were losing their sense of religious and cultural identity, al-Banna created a broad movement to preach faith as the key to social and economic justice. His model of political activism combined with Islamic charity work spread throughout the Muslim world. By the 1940s, it had an estimated two million members.

Today it is a global organisation with autonomous branches. Hamas in Gaza is a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot. In general, the Brotherhood believes in the primacy of Muslim law, in the supremacy of Islam and in the idea that women and men should play their traditional roles in society, although there is a broad diversity of opinions and interpretations of these views. Since its inception the movement opposed violence as a means of achieving its objectives.

In 1949, al-Banna was murdered by government agents and, in 1954, Gamal Abdul Nasser banned the movement, throwing many of its members into jail. The movement withdrew after that and had to wait 60 years to win government. The moment has now come for the Brotherhood. The question is what will they do with it.

John Owens wrote recently, in the *New York Times*, that political Islam is now thriving because it is tapping into the ideological roots that were kept alive and boosted by the failure of Nasserism and Baathism.

"Islamists have for years provided the narrative about what ails Muslim society and where the cure lies," Owens said. "The Arab Spring has increased its credibility."

"Their reputation for being clean is unrivalled," wrote Steven Owens in *Foreign Affairs*. "They have appropriated the rhetoric of reform and progressive politics and have been uncompromising in their nationalism, having consistently opposed the deal with the US."

Many commentators are wondering how Islam will be integrated into a democratic system based on civil liberties, without contradicting democratic principles. There are fears that Egypt's deep economic and social problems could be obscured by religious battles, while the priority should be on stabilising the country politically and economically and making the necessary reforms.

There are also concerns the Islamists will upset a regional balance of power in place since the 1970s, and that US influence in the region might diminish. On the other hand, the peace treaty with Israel hangs in the balance. Brotherhood officials have assured the US that they will abide by the 32-year-old Camp David Accord, which is considered a cornerstone of stability in the region, but they say they want to renegotiate some provisions.

Emad Gad, an Egyptian specialist on Israeli studies, told *Associated Press* that the Brotherhood feared its base. "Raised and fed on hatred of Israel. They have been told for decades that any deal with Israel is corrupt ... They know that Egypt is not Gaza and any ruling party must respect treaties inherited from previous governments because they can't risk deterioration of relations with America, or even Israel."

There is no doubt that there are high expectations placed on the Brotherhood, which may need to tread carefully both at home and abroad. Its leaders have proven somehow adept at playing politics but there are challenges ahead. Between now and the end of June there will be elections for parliament's upper house, or Shura Council; the drafting of a new constitution; a nationwide referendum on the document; and then presidential elections.

It certainly will be interesting to see how the

Brotherhood evolves from a grass-roots religious organisation, with limited political experience, to a government that is inclusive, able to negotiate with the young revolutionaries and the military, and make institutional reforms to eradicate corruption and poverty, setting the tone for a new model of Middle Eastern democracy. There will be challenges along the way, probably difficult years ahead, but those who voted for them will expect nothing less.

While the dust may be starting to settle in Egypt, the situation is quickly deteriorating in Syria, which is experiencing a protracted and deadly struggle over its political future. The uprising against the Bashar al-Assad government by forces and rebel groups continues unabated.

Syria's Interior Minister Mohammed Shaar said the crackdown would go on. "Security forces will continue their struggle to clean Syria's soil of outlaws," he told the media recently.

Analysts say that Syria's transition is likely to be lengthy and violent, despite rapidly deteriorating economic and security conditions. The main reason is that the regime remains strong, with a well-resourced professional army, loyal to the president.

The military hasn't turned against Syria's president and government officials haven't defected in significant numbers. The broader Alawi community is likely to remain loyal to the regime and oppose democratic reforms, which is what the Sunni majority want.

The University of Oklahoma's Joshua Landis says, "It is hard to determine whether this is due to the rapaciousness of a corrupt elite, the bleak prospects that the Alawi community faces in a post al-Assad Syria, or the weak faith that many people place in democracy and power-sharing formulas."

The UN Security Council has so far been unable to intervene because of Russian and Chinese vetoes and the Arab League suspended its monitoring mission because of increasing violence, sending signals that regional efforts to halt the bloodshed have failed and the only alternative is foreign intervention. The UN-Arab League special envoy to Syria also failed to convince the regime to stop the bloodshed. Because of Syria's position at the cross-roads of the Middle East conflict, there is a fear that foreign intervention could spark a civil war that could engulf and destabilise the

entire region, particularly, the looming prospects of an escalation in the conflict between Israel and Iran and pro-Iranian forces Hezbollah and Hamas.

On the other hand, the Syrian opposition remains fragmented, disorganised and leaderless, with the several resistance groups that have emerged during the crackdown operating independently from one another.

The most prominent is the Free Syrian Army (FSA), under the leadership of Colonel Riyadh al-Assad, but media reports say it is limited and under-resourced.

It claims to have 15,000 defectors in its ranks and it has been said that it is the only armed force fighting against government troops and protecting civilians. But other independent rebel groups are also recruiting civilians and army defectors. While these groups are doing most of the fighting they are operating independently from the FSA.

The Syrian National Council (SNC) is Syria's leading opposition coalition although it hasn't been recognised by the international community, and remains highly factionalised.

According to Michael Weiss from *Foreign Affairs* magazine, intervention would be premature because "Syria's various opposition groups have yet to coalesce into a unified political force worth backing".

According to Weiss, the SNC lacks the leverage to pull varying factions of the insurgency under its umbrella. It doesn't have the power to establish a clear chain of command for the rebel forces on the ground. This makes it difficult for a foreign intervention to succeed.

Most resistance groups see the urgent need for intervention and have called for bombing raids on strategic targets, a no-fly zone and a buffer zone. They want the international community to provide them with arms, support and money.

But there appears to be no international inclination for a Libya-style intervention. So far Washington has expressed reservation about intervention and it is now considering how it could support the opposition by sending medical assistance or helping to create a safe zone within the country to protect the civilian population close to the Syrian-Turkish border.

NATO, Turkey, and the Arab world have not shown any inclination to intervene either. The UN is holding talks on a new resolution and will discuss

the Arab peace plan aimed at ending the crisis, but it may continue to face resistance from Russia.

Last January, Moscow invited the Syrian government and the opposition for talks but this came much too late. The opposition wants al-Assad out, they don't want negotiations.

The government decreed that a referendum on the new draft constitution was held late February but the opposition has made clear that it rejects any political moves by the government while there are still violent attacks against protesters.

"So long as the Syrian military leadership remains united, the opposition remains fragmented, and foreign powers remain on the sidelines, the al-Assad regime is likely to survive," Landis says.

Inaction however is having its price. The question is how many more lives will it take. How many more women will be made widows and children orphans before the international community agrees to confront the al-Assad regime. A few weeks ago al-Assad agreed to a cease fire starting from April 10 but violence has continued and there is no sign of an end to the crackdown.

The revolutions have sunk most of the countries into economic crises. According to political-risk consultancy Geopolicity, which conducted an analysis of IMF data in October, the uprisings have cost US\$55 billion, with Libya and Syria being the biggest losers, followed by Egypt, Tunisia, Bahrain and Yemen.

Both Tunisia and Egypt are beset by high levels of inflation, unemployment and poverty, left by decades of government corruption and the recent revolutions.

In Tunisia, the economy has suffered from losses that have amounted to \$2.5 billion Tunisian dinars. Foreign direct development has fallen by 20 per cent and more than 80 foreign companies have

shut down their operations. Questions are now being asked whether the economic setbacks will overtake the social gains made by the revolutions.

In Egypt, where tourism and trade revenues are drying up and political instability has halted foreign investment, 40 per cent of the population are living on US\$2 a day or less and the instability is pushing millions ever closer to the poverty line.

Egypt's central bank has been spending about US\$2 billion in foreign reserves a month as it tries to plug a balance of payments deficit while keeping the Egyptian pound stable against the dollar.

According to media reports, Egypt will need US\$10 billion to meet its debts, and with government reserves dropping by 50 per cent last year, there is barely enough money to cover the next three months' imports, and this could lead to food shortages.

The generals have made a request to the IMF for US \$3.2 billion in aid to prop up the economy.

"The economy faces challenges that have to be addressed by an economic program that safeguards stability and creates conditions for a strong recovery," the IMF's mission to Egypt said. Public revenues have fallen by 77 per cent in Yemen and 84 per cent in Libya damaging the ability of governments to

deliver basic and essential services.

In January, leaders of the Arab Spring sought to assure the world's elite in Davos that the rise of political Islam was not a threat to democracy, and pleaded for help creating jobs and satisfying the hunger of their peoples for a better life.

Failure to lure investments will continue to threaten the transition to democracy and even spark more protests. The support promised by the G8 last May hasn't materialised.

According to a report issued by Geopolicity, the slow pace of European financial support is largely explained by the unprecedented fiscal crises sweeping European countries, on the back of a decade

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of expensive military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq; the fact that the UK and France tied up resources in Libya, and the absence of a clear road-map to facilitate EU and US engagement. The US Congress is still to approve \$1.3 billion in military aid to Egypt.

“The risks are clear,” the report says, “Unless the drivers of change in each country are strategically engaged and a region-wide support program conceived, the outcome of the uprising will be unknown and could potentially be regressive.”

Yet the opportunity for a positive outcome has never been clearer. Experts on the region say that while aid is urgently needed, it must be accompanied by real economic reforms that succeed in transforming the economies and address the longstanding development challenges facing the region.

Oxford University’s Adeel Malik and former Jordanian Finance Minister Bassim Awadallah wrote in their paper *The Economics of the Arab Spring* “During the next decade an estimated 100 million jobs need to be created in the Middle East. The public sector, already bloated and insufficient, is unprepared to meet this employment challenge.”

Both authors say that economic diversification is the key to economic development. “Without developing a robust private sector and without reducing the region’s dependence on natural resources, the gains that the Arab world has made in literacy and health cannot be translated into lasting economic prosperity.”

According to the authors, the region (the Middle East and North Africa) is the largest spender on defence (as a share of GDP). They blame economic fragmentation, the absence of a large connected market and excessive dependence on natural resources as the major contributing factors for the lack of economic development.

According to them what is needed is an infrastructure that connects regional economies; decentralised control of the economies; and above all, the eradication of arbitrary regulations that inhibit the movement of goods and labour across borders. All of these challenges, they write, need a regional approach.

There is no doubt that a paradigm shift and a new vision will be needed to achieve the type of regional economic integration that they recommend.

A woman holding an wounded relative during the Yemen uprising.

PHOTO: SAMUEL ARANDA/CORBIS/
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Suggestions have been made by the former Egyptian foreign minister and Arab League secretary general Amr Moussa that there is a need for a type of Marshall Plan with immediate impact to tackle the region’s challenges.

Since neither the US nor Europe can afford the massive aid flows that would underpin a Marshall Plan’s success, it has been suggested that the oil-rich Arab Gulf, together with powerful emerging economies such as China, India, Brazil and Turkey would need to shoulder much of the burden.

“The Marshall Plan [implemented after WWII] was not simply money,” said Mona Yacoubian from

the US Institute of Peace. “It was its vision for a new prosperous Europe built on innovation and partnership, collective problem solving, innovative ideas, and an integrated approach that recognised the interplay of politics, economic and security with a particular focus on building regional economic integration.”

Yacoubian said that a Marshall Plan-inspired strategy for the Arab world would seek to lay the foundations for successful political and economic transitions. It would build strong partnerships between the UN, European Union, Gulf and emerging economies and the Arab world.

“A holistic approach that focuses on political

change, economic growth and regional security would begin to redress the region’s pressing problems,” She said.

While the final chapters of the Arab Spring are yet to be written, it has certainly presented a historical opportunity for the Arab world to turn stunted states into peaceful and prosperous nations and the chance to realise its vast potential.

It is now the right time for the international community to respond with a region-wide assistance program led by Arab states, so that the Arab Spring can flourish. Otherwise, the Arab world could miss this unique opportunity. Unfortunately, history is filled with missed opportunities. **R**