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Democracy Embattled

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FEAR AND LEARNING IN THE ARAB UPRISINGS

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As the tenth anniversary of the first uprising of the Arab Spring approaches, massive and sustained popular uprisings in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon have shown that the Arab world is far from finished with the question of democracy. In each of these countries, protesters have connected grievances about economic hardships and corruption to issues of governance. They have demanded changes to undemocratic aspects of current power structures: sectarian bargains in Iraq and Lebanon, and military dominance in Sudan and Algeria.

The struggle of citizens of Arab-majority countries for more responsive, accountable, and participatory governance has been long and difficult. Vested interests both foreign and domestic have pushed back, often with great brutality. In Lebanon, the Arab country in which citizens long had the most individual freedom, sectarianism erupted into civil war in 1975. Even after the fighting ended, sectarian divisions constrained political competition and undermined accountability; they also opened the country to ongoing foreign intervention. Algeria's experiment with political pluralism in the early 1990s led into a decade of horrific civil war.

The U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 also unleashed the demons of sectarianism, which continue to bedevil that country's efforts at establishing democracy a decade and a half later. In fact, the Iraq war and its conflict-filled aftermath might well have forestalled uprisings in Egypt and other Arab countries where pressure for political reform had been building in the early 2000s.¹

Similarly, the scorecard a few years after the mass uprisings of 2011 was hardly one to encourage protesters in the region. Out of the six

countries that experienced uprisings, only Tunisia (the first to erupt in antiauthoritarian protests) succeeded in building a viable democratic system, albeit one that remains fragile due to a floundering economy. Meanwhile, the frightening trajectory of other Arab countries that saw massive protests likely dampened the enthusiasm of publics in the region for bottom-up change over the past half-decade. In Bahrain, a 2011 uprising was crushed by troops from neighboring countries; Syria, Yemen, and Libya remain the sites of bloody regional proxy wars and humanitarian tragedies; and Egypt since 2013 has descended into highly militarized rule accompanied by unprecedented human-rights abuses.

Yet the discouragement and fears bred by such experiences seem to have put only a temporary brake on the efforts of publics in the Arab world to push for change. Eventually, dissatisfaction with governments outweighs these other factors and brings people into the streets again. Despite the terrible violence that wracked Iraq in the mid-2000s, Arabs were out in massive numbers by early 2011 asking for bread, freedom, and social justice. And amid the horrors that continue to unfold in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt, citizens of other states in the region—Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent Egypt again—have been out in the streets in 2019 calling for economic justice and political change.

Why do protests keep breaking out in Arab countries every few years, defying predictions to the contrary?² In short, life has become unbearable for many citizens, who suffer from both grinding economic hardship and government corruption, not to mention police brutality if they dare to complain. It is not easy for authoritarian governments to fix these problems, even if they care to do so, because the issues in question stem from deep-seated structural factors that have prevented the emergence of productive economies and accountable governments.

As Larry Diamond wrote in these pages a decade ago, oil was the key factor that had made the Arab region a striking exception to the global trend of democratization during the “third wave.” Because many governments in the region derived their income more from hydrocarbon rents than from taxing the public, political power became highly centralized and societies failed to “develop the organic expectations of accountability that emerge when states make citizens pay taxes.”³ Other countries’ dependence on oil from the region also skewed international engagement with Arab states.

Diamond predicted in 2010 that when the global energy revolution hit, it would “bring a decisive end to Arab political exceptionalism.”⁴ And that turned out to be true, although the change in global energy markets worked in conjunction with another major factor: a youth bulge in Arab countries brought on by rapid population growth. The combined impact of demographic change and the declining value of hydrocarbon reserves led to a breakdown of the bargain on which many Arab govern-

ments relied in various forms: citizen acquiescence to authoritarian rule in exchange for government services with little or no taxation.⁵

With the contract between governments and the governed losing its force, it is not surprising that citizens continue to protest. Nor is it a surprise that some governments have resorted to levels of coercion that were unnecessary in the days when they could buy social peace with largesse supported directly or indirectly by hydrocarbon revenues. The fact that protesters are willing to enter the fray despite high risks of violence reflects the desperation of their situation, but there is also a new factor. As the movements in Sudan and Algeria in particular illustrate, many participants seem to believe that they can improve their odds by drawing on the experiences of neighboring countries, as well as the histories of their own societies.

Sudan and Algeria: Learning to Overcome Fear

All the Arab countries in which there were major uprisings in 2019 have significant histories of violence. Civil war, sectarian or regional conflict, terrorism, state brutality, external intervention, and foreign occupation loom large in the consciousness of Algerian, Iraqi, Lebanese, and Sudanese citizens. The recent experience of other states in the region casts a pall over expectations as to the likely outcomes of popular uprisings. Yet it seems that protesters have made a turn toward learning from their own countries' painful experiences, as well as those of neighbors, instead of being paralyzed by them.

In Algeria and Sudan in particular, protesters have had to overcome not only fears of violence—with the Sudanese themselves having suffered a brief but vicious crackdown as recently as June 2019—but also worries that strong militaries would inevitably outmaneuver civilians seeking more democratic rule. Egypt continues to loom large as a negative example in this regard. The 2013 military coup that ousted President Mohamed Morsi and brought then-general Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to power not only ended a brief attempt at a democratic transition, but also had significant ripple effects in Tunisia and other Arab countries.

The uprisings in Algeria and Sudan remain unfinished, and it is unclear whether either will lead to a sustained transition away from authoritarian government. Still, protesters have made notable and unexpected gains—with their achievements continuing well past the removal of both Sudan's longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir and his Algerian counterpart Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April 2019. In Sudan, an agreement was reached in mid-2019 between the civilian opposition and the military council that had assumed control following Bashir's ouster. The deal laid the groundwork for the creation of an appointed Sovereignty Council comprising eleven members (six civilians and five from the military, which would initially hold the chair); the appointment of a

civilian prime minister; and negotiations with armed rebel groups. In Algeria, the military-dominated government that took over following Bouteflika's ouster still holds power but has made several concessions: It has agreed to subject civilian officials to corruption proceedings, and it twice canceled scheduled presidential elections under pressure from protesters before forcing an election in December 2019.

Among the most important lessons cited by Sudanese and Algerian protesters so far are these: Popular pressure for change must be massive and sustained to be effective; transition plans designed by the military—particularly proposals for quick elections—can be a trap; protesters should be wary of involvement by Arab state “frenemies”; and going forward requires moving beyond fear.

Popular pressure must be massive, sustained, and backed by societal institutions. Algerian and Sudanese protesters have stayed in the streets much longer and in larger numbers than did protesters in at least some of the 2011–12 uprisings. Weekly demonstrations by Algerians began in February 2019 and have continued for more than nine months as of this writing in December 2019, with the number of participants ranging from the low thousands to hundreds of thousands. In Sudan, the period of large-scale protests and civil disobedience lasted some eight months beginning in December 2018, with hundreds of thousands showing up at key junctures.

This is a very different trajectory from the one followed in Egypt, where massive protests in January and February 2011 ended after eighteen days and those of June and July 2013 came to a halt after only two days, in both cases ceasing after the military removed the president (Hosni Mubarak in 2011, Mohamed Morsi in 2013). Protests continued episodically after the coups in Egypt, but on a much smaller scale and with participants limited to groups that were disfavored by the change—primarily secular youth groups in 2011–13 and Islamists for a few months after the July 2013 coup. In 2013, the military eventually shut down most protests with mass killings and a draconian protest law.

By contrast, protesters in Algeria and Sudan continued to demonstrate regularly and in large numbers long after achieving their initial goal of removing authoritarian leaders. Bashir was ousted after approximately four months of protest, Bouteflika after fewer than six. Yet protesters continued to show up for months, upping their demands to a broader change in the governing system.

In Algeria, protests initially triggered by Bouteflika's plans to seek a fifth term “grew to a nationwide movement pushing for a clean cut from the past and a new republic with a new constitution,” according to Algerian scholar Dalia Ghanem.⁶ Amina Afaf Chaieb of the prodemocracy organization Mouvement Ibtykar stated in August 2019 that persistent protests were bringing results:

Not only did Bouteflika resign, but there were two elections that have been suspended. There were oligarchs and political figures that have been put in prison, and also the regime has fractured from within. This just shows that we are in a historical dynamic towards change, and we are not going to settle for a change of facade. We want the refoundation of a democratic Algeria.⁷

In Sudan, student protester Alaa Salah (whose photo became an iconic image of the movement) told an interviewer two weeks after Bashir's removal, "I am ready, and Sudanese people are ready, to stay at the sit-in area until our demands are met. . . . The previous government, which lasted for thirty years, always said, 'we'll do something.' Now what we want is implementation of policies, not words."⁸

The staying power of the protests in Sudan and Algeria also owed much to the way not only opposition political parties, but also institutions with deep societal roots became involved. Whether or not demonstrators in these countries were consciously drawing on international experience, such involvement represents a striking parallel with the successful protests in Tunisia, where the Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail played a vital role. The Sudanese Professionals' Association (SPA), which formed in 2016 when associations for doctors, lawyers, and journalists banded together in the face of worsening economic conditions, emerged as a pivotal actor in Sudan's uprising. Protesters started coming out in the thousands only once the SPA—which enjoyed much more public credibility than political opposition groups—agreed to stage demonstrations explicitly linking economic woes with calls for the end of the regime. Similarly in Algeria, protests snowballed in early 2019 as organizations with public credibility such as the National Organization of Mujahideen (veterans of the war for independence from France) lent their support, as did organizations of judges, doctors, lawyers, and students.⁹

Transition plans designed by the military—especially quick elections—can be a trap. The naïveté about the military's role that characterized Egypt's 2011 and 2013 protests has been absent in Algeria and Sudan. In Egypt, groups involved in the 2011 protests became sharply divided about whether or not the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) should be entrusted with overseeing constitutional change and elections. The Muslim Brotherhood (the opposition group most able to mobilize protesters in great numbers) largely cooperated with the SCAF in 2011–12, and in this the Brotherhood enjoyed much public support, although secular groups continued to hold smaller protests. The SCAF decided to amend the constitution quickly after thirty-year president Hosni Mubarak was forced out in February 2011, and then to head directly to elections for a full-term parliament and president, ensuring that no deep change within the state would take place. Then in 2013,

much of the public, including many but not all secular groups, supported then—Defense Minister Sisi in overthrowing elected president Morsi (a Brotherhood politician)—only to find that their calls for new democratic elections were ignored as Sisi’s government embraced a harsh new form of military rule.¹⁰

In Algeria and Sudan, military leaders have played a dominant role akin to that in Egypt (in contrast to the much more modest role played by the military in Tunisia). Yet Algerian and Sudanese protesters have expressed their rejection of an Egypt-like trajectory for their countries. This has sometimes involved explicit references to Egypt: Sudanese protesters in April 2019 used the slogan and hashtag “Either victory or Egypt,” and demonstrators photographed in September 2019 in Algiers carried a hand-lettered sign in Arabic and English reading, “No to Egyptian scenario in Algeria.”¹¹ But protesters have also drawn lessons from their own national histories. Veteran journalist Borzou Daragahi has argued that Algerians, due to the crafty and brutal behavior of the security forces during the country’s 1990s civil war, had “very little of the ‘army and people are one hand’ attitude that led Egyptians revolutionaries to falsely believe their aspirations were shared by the military.”¹²

In addition to protesting against ongoing military control, demonstrators in Sudan and Algeria have rejected quick elections proposed by the military as a trick they have seen before (whether in Egypt or in their own countries). In Sudan, opposition-party leader Omer Eldigair voiced his concern that quick elections would bring back elements of the old regime. He also evoked Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood (at that time still allied with the SCAF) swept elections in 2011–12 due to its superior grassroots organization: “If you have elections right now, you give the power right back to Bashir’s people—they are the only ones with an organized party structure. . . . That is why we are asking for four years of civilian-led transition.”¹³ Eventually protest leaders and military representatives agreed on a three-year transition period leading up to elections, with the abovementioned Sovereignty Council overseeing the transition.

In Algeria, resisting the military’s efforts to replace the deposed Bouteflika through a quick election became a primary focus of protests. Demonstrators called for more thorough institutional change as well as the resignation of leaders still in office who are seen as corrupt. Elections scheduled for mid-April and then early July were cancelled when ongoing protests compelled would-be candidates to withdraw. Protesters saw the proposed ballotings as a way to “give the political system a facelift and create an opportunity for this system . . . to regenerate itself.”¹⁴ As a young protester told a BBC journalist in April, “It’s like someone who was stealing for the last 20 years and cheating for the last 20 years telling you, ‘Please trust me, I will be nice and I will organise a transparent vote.’ Everybody knows they will cheat again.”¹⁵ In the end, an election was held on December 12, with five contenders drawn from

within the old political system. With protests continuing despite increasing arrests in the weeks leading up to the voting, it is clear that the new president—Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who served briefly as prime minister under Bouteflika—will face strong challenges from demonstrators.

Beware involvement by regional “frenemies.” The growing resistance to Iranian involvement in protests in Iraq and Lebanon has been much discussed; meanwhile, in North Africa protesters have zeroed in on the malign influence of Gulf Arab states. Sudanese and Algerian protesters have signaled their awareness of the role that these (and other) governments have played in thwarting the realization of protester demands in many Arab countries. In Egypt in 2012, Qatar and Turkey supported the Muslim Brotherhood, perhaps encouraging the movement to believe that it had no need to keep up solidarity with secular democracy advocates. The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait then supported the 2013 military coup and the ensuing crackdown on the Brotherhood, supplying Sisi with billions of dollars in assistance.

Then there are military interventions, carried out directly or by proxy. Troops from Saudi Arabia and the UAE rolled into Bahrain to crush the March 2011 uprising; caused a humanitarian catastrophe by attacking the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in war-torn Yemen; and teamed up with Egypt to support rogue general and faction leader Khalifa Haftar in Libya. Meanwhile, Syria has become the tragic field on which Arab states as well as Iran, Israel, Turkey, Russia, and the United States have played out their regional rivalries.

Given Algeria’s long struggle against French colonization, culminating in the brutal war of 1954–62, it is not surprising that the country is particularly sensitive about external influence. While Europe has long been the primary focus of concern, suspicion of possible Gulf involvement has grown with the recent uprising. During a March 2019 interview in front of the hospital where then-President Bouteflika was being treated, Algerians interrupted a journalist reporting for the Saudi-owned network Al Arabiya; they decried Saudi Arabia for “stand[ing] against the hopes of the Algerian people” and denounced the network in similar terms.¹⁶ The incident took place shortly after an Algerian military delegation was received with honors by the UAE prime minister, and amidst a campaign by Saudi and UAE media promoting a military-controlled transition.¹⁷

Due to its poverty and ongoing internal conflicts, Sudan is much more vulnerable to external influence than is Algeria, and Sudanese protesters have expressed keen concern on this subject. After Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged US\$3 billion in aid to the military council in April 2019, protesters chanted “We do not want Saudi aid even if we have to eat beans and falafel!”¹⁸ They also objected to Sisi’s attempt to take the lead in brokering a deal between protesters and the military, with demonstra-

tors chanting, “Tell Al-Sisi this is Sudan, your borders are just [until] Aswan” (a southern city and province of Egypt).¹⁹

Protesters’ suspicion of Arab governments ended up shaping events in Sudan in mid-2019, a development that highlights growing Arab-African rivalries. Although the Egyptian, Saudi, and UAE governments had long disliked Bashir due to his Islamist roots, they became alarmed when popular protests broke out in the months preceding his fall. Sisi in particular suddenly warmed up to Bashir and hosted him in Cairo in January 2019, perhaps hoping that Bashir would reciprocate by resolving old border disputes and supporting Egypt in debates concerning access to Nile waters.²⁰ Sisi switched tracks after Bashir was deposed, expressing support for the demands of the Sudanese people and, as chair of the African Union (AU), trying to position himself as a mediator between the protesters and the military. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia and the UAE swung into action with financial and communications support for the Sudanese military.

Yet Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE soon found themselves outflanked by powerful sub-Saharan states, in which Sudanese protesters had more confidence. Despite his position as chair, Sisi found the AU complicated to manage. When the Sudanese security services deposed Bashir, the AU’s Peace and Security Council initially condemned the military’s seizure of power and suspension of the constitution. The organization threatened to suspend Sudan’s membership, as it had done to Egypt at the time of the 2013 coup. Sisi tried to mitigate the impact of AU pressure by extending the time that Sudan’s military would be given to turn control over to civilians. But the AU went ahead with suspending Sudan after the June 2019 crackdown—immediately after a visit to Egypt and the UAE by Sudanese military chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan.²¹

Following the crackdown, diplomatic efforts to broker a solution increased, but the Gulf states were at a disadvantage due to the perception that they had supported the junta’s violent actions. Into the picture strode Ethiopian prime minister Abiy Ahmed, with whom both Sudan’s opposition and its military agreed to meet. Abiy played a key role in brokering the agreement reached later that summer. Meanwhile, Egypt’s Sisi is still struggling to recoup his influence in Sudan.²² For now, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE seem to be biding their time, looking for ways to bolster prospects for continued military rule.

Going forward requires moving beyond fear. Protesters in Sudan and Algeria also seem to have learned, perhaps primarily from their own countries’ experiences, that only by overcoming fears of violence can they begin addressing the problems of authoritarian rule.

There was no widespread uprising in Algeria during the 2011 Arab Spring (although protests about specific grievances went on). To explain

this, analysts have frequently invoked the regime's ability to buy social peace with hydrocarbon revenues and the population's painful memories of the civil war that took place during the 1990s, in which at least a hundred-thousand people were killed.²³ Dalia Ghanem has argued that even the youth currently in the streets, who do not remember the 1990s, learned from "the black decade." The current uprising, she suggests, has become a way for young people to prove themselves, and to say to their elders, "You did 1954 [the anticolonial war against France], our brothers did 1988 and 1992 [previous uprisings for democracy], and we are doing 2019." According to Ghanem, these youth "moved beyond violence and are doing it their way—meaning *silmiyya* (peaceful) and *hadhariyya* (civilized)."²⁴

While Sudan, too, has a long history of fearsome violence, Sudanese protestors also had a more recent cause for fear. During the June 3 crackdown, security forces had killed at least 120 protestors, and fifty were raped. And yet, protestors came out again in large numbers on June 30. As Mai Hassan and Ahmed Koudouda recounted in these pages, "Many spoke of performing *wudu*, or ritual Islamic washing, before leaving their homes: They wanted to be in a state of purity should they be martyred."²⁵

The renewed demonstrations, rather than ending in another massacre, paved the way for the Ethiopian-brokered deal. The agreement is far from meeting the full demands of the protestors. It keeps many of the key military figures of the old regime in power for the three-year transitional period, and the future outlook remains hazy. As SPA spokesman Amjad Farid told *Foreign Policy*, the agreement "does not satisfy all of the objectives the Sudanese people wanted to realize in their revolution, but it is a premise for their goals to be recognized though a process." Others involved in the negotiations were disappointed with many aspects of the deal, with one admitting, "this is the best deal we could get."²⁶ In any case, the deal, however flawed, is more than protestors would most likely have gotten had they not faced their fears and gone back into the streets en masse after the June 3 crackdown.

Whether or not the protestors in Sudan and Algeria ultimately succeed in bringing about the formation of civilian democratic governments, they have gotten as far as they have partly because of what they learned from their own experiences and those of regional neighbors. This virtuous circle of learning might also prove of benefit to others in the region.

Forecast: Stormy with a Chance of Democracy

The specific grievances of protestors—economic hardships and injustice, high-level corruption, poor government services—cannot be addressed without deep alterations in the power structure and political economy of Arab states. Given this, it is not reasonable to expect that change will come quickly, easily, or evenly across the region. Nor can one take

for granted that all change will be in the direction of democracy. The new approach of demonstrators in the Arab world, based on hard-won learning from their own experiences and those of neighbors, reflects a realism that precludes such assumptions. The protesters in Sudan, for example, seemed to realize that change will only happen in stages.

It is reasonable to expect more turmoil in the Arab region as countries start down the difficult road from rentier-based authoritarianism toward productive economies and political systems accountable to citizens. Governance in Arab states a decade from now will probably involve a patchwork of systems, with nascent forms of democracy having the best chance of taking root in those countries where levels of human development are relatively high, states are less able to rely on hydrocarbon rents, and intervention by regional or outside frenemies is less prevalent. Meanwhile the social forces desiring change and those resisting it will compete to see who can learn more quickly and put that learning to better effect.

NOTES

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