

The Arab Uprisings—Where From and Where To?

Nicola Pratt, 11 November 2011

Since former president of Tunisia, Ben Ali was forced from power on 18 January this year, following mass demonstrations, we have witnessed one Arab country after another rise up against their governments, demanding freedom, dignity and social justice. Initial euphoria about what is now come to be known as the 'Arab spring' has given way to a recognition of the immense task that lies ahead in ending dictatorship.

In all cases, uprisings began as popular and largely peaceful demonstrations. By popular, I mean that demonstrations began not as expressions of formal political opposition but of popular discontent. In Tunisia and Egypt, these largely peaceful demonstrations were successful in deposing the dictator (although, not the dictatorship). In Yemen, there have been largely peaceful demonstrations since the end of January but these have not yet led to President Ali Abdullah Saleh stepping down –although he has promised to do so on a number of occasions. In Libya, Syria and Bahrain, peaceful demonstrations were quickly met with concerted armed repression by regimes there. Libya turned into a civil war, with NATO military intervention aiding the anti-Gaddafi fighters. Syria may be tottering on the brink of a civil war as increasing numbers of army defectors turn their weapons on the Syrian security forces, bringing with it a possibility that Syria may become an arena for a Western proxy war against Iran. Although it looks unlikely that there will be Western or NATO foreign military intervention, there has been speculation of military intervention by Turkey, which is already host to the Syrian opposition and Free Syrian Army. In Bahrain, foreign military intervention by Saudi Arabia, and undoubtedly supported by the US and its allies, successfully and brutally crushed an

uprising there. In Jordan, Algeria and Morocco, there have been a number of demonstrations but these have not (yet) sparked popular uprisings. Nevertheless, the governments there have felt sufficiently worried to make political and economic reforms. In Lebanon, there have not yet been any demonstrations against the current government –although lots of demonstrations either for or against the Syrian regime. The reasons for the absence of popular uprisings in these countries needs to be further researched.

The uprisings across the Arab world have obliged scholars to reconsider the prospects for democracy in these countries.

Over the last 10 years, the trend in academic scholarship on the Middle East has been to study the maintenance or renewal of authoritarianism. Scholars have focused on such factors as:

The manipulation of elections to keep the ruling party in power;

Divide and rule tactics amongst the opposition to keep them powerless;

The co-optation of economic elites to support the ruling party;

The weakness of civil society;

The weakness of political parties.

The people of the Middle East have challenged this scholarship through their own actions. They have shown immense bravery in standing up to their dictators and their brutal police forces. They have demonstrated to the world that the people of the Middle East are not passive or powerless in the face of authoritarianism and regime

tactics to divide and rule, to co-opt or to manipulate politicians. The people of the Middle East are making history –mainly through peaceful, mass demonstrations. These demonstrations have not been instigated by opposition political parties, although some of these parties have joined the demonstrations later.

Moreover, the uprisings have not been spontaneous outpourings of frustration at their corrupt and despotic rulers. Rather, the uprisings represent the culmination of years of protests and unrest, which, because it was on a small scale and easily repressed by the authorities, failed to register as significant by Western policymakers.

I argue that the reasons for the uprisings are a combination of long term structural and agential factors that can only be understood against the context of the historical development of post-independence Arab countries.

Structural factors are the negative impact of neo-liberal reforms combined with an intensification of authoritarianism in the name of ‘counter-terrorism’. Agential factors are the increasing assertiveness of civil society actors independent of state institutions. The significance of these changes is that they signalled the decisive break of the longstanding social contract between state and citizens in the Arab world, in which citizens were largely obedient to their regimes in return for their inclusion in and benefitting from the project of national modernisation. A widespread consensus within Arab countries that regimes would deliver national modernisation to the benefit of all provided the basis on which these regimes were able to govern without resort to widespread coercion. I use Antonio Gramsci’s term hegemony to understand this relationship between consensus and coercion that underpinned the authority and legitimacy of these regimes.

Now let's turn to examine in more detail the structural changes over the last decade that contributed to the Arab uprisings. I am focusing on Egypt to illustrate these changes.

Neo-liberal economic reforms

In 1991, Egypt embarked upon economic reforms, mandated by the IMF and World Bank and supported by the US and EU. But the reform process was slow, due in part to government fears of provoking widescale social unrest. However, only after 2003 did the government intensify its introduction of neo-liberal reforms. These included an acceleration in the privatisation of public sector industries; reducing government expenditure; lowering barriers to imported goods and foreign investment; and devaluing the Egyptian pound by approximately 2/3 between 2000 and 2009.

Neo-liberal economic reforms had the following effects:

1. Increasing unemployment and underemployment: Despite recording quite good rates of economic growth, this has not led to the creation of jobs at a rate that corresponds with the number of new entrants to the labour market. Unemployment amongst first-time job seekers is the highest. The global economic recession has exacerbated these trends by reducing the percentage of economic growth. According to the Egypt Human Development Report in 2010, at least 90% of the unemployed were aged less than 30 years and many more were affected by underemployment. Unemployment amongst women under 30 was almost three times that of young men. Amongst these young people, the highest unemployment rates are found amongst post-secondary school and university educated youth. Moreover, job creation is occurring faster in the informal and irregular employment sectors, where pay

and conditions are not great, rather than the formal private and public sectors (EHDR 2010).

2. Real incomes have been falling in relation to the rising cost of living. In 2000, Egypt began to float its currency, leading to a devaluation. The World Bank and IMF welcomed this move in order to make Egypt's exports more competitive internationally. However, devaluation made imports doubly expensive. Rising food prices in 2008 exacerbated these problems further. The cost of living has also been rising because the Egyptian government reduced subsidies on fuel and raised prices of telecommunications and transport. Meanwhile, the minimum wage had not been increased for 26 years.
3. Poor education and health: In order to reduce public expenditure, the government cut back expenditure on education and health care. Those who can afford it, pay for it. The rest make do with inadequate public provision, sometimes supplemented by voluntary efforts, such as by religious associations.
4. Rising poverty and inequality: whilst macro-economic indicators have all been quite impressive, the wealth generated by economic reforms has not trickled down to the poor. Rather the numbers living in poverty increased and income inequality in Egypt has increased over the last 10 years. (See the Arab Human Development Report of 2009). Economic reforms have led to the creation of a business class, who benefitted from close links to the regime to obtain cheap loans, monopolies over markets and illegal land sell-offs. In effect, neoliberal economic reforms created crony capitalism. Popular opposition to the injustice of such corruption is encapsulated by the slogan of

protesters in Egypt: 'A kilo of meat is LE100 whilst a square kilometre of land is LE1'—meaning that billionaire friends of the regime bought chunks of land at cut down prices to build luxury housing complexes whilst ordinary people could no longer afford to eat meat.

The total effect of these reforms were to impoverish the working and middle classes. But these reforms has different impacts on men and women. Men, particularly working class men, suffered in particular ways as a result of neoliberal economic reforms. Male unemployment or underemployment, low wages and rising cost of living coupled with police harassment in particular of working class youth has been experienced as emasculating. For a good ethnographic description of young working class Egyptian men, see Salwa Ismail's book of 2006 (*Political Life in Cairo's New Quarters*, University of Minnesota Press).

In the course of the Egyptian uprising, Egyptian men sought to reclaim their dignity as Egyptians and as men. The theme of bravery and honour was common amongst many placards portrayed in Tahrir Square. A group of young men were photographed holding a large Egyptian flag, upon which was written 'My country. I'm sorry it took me so long': implying that the young men had finally come to rescue Egypt. A man carried a placard saying: 'It is an honour for me', referring to the injuries to his face sustained during clashes with regime thugs; another young man held up a placard saying, 'I wish I die for Egypt'; another man wrote on his placard, 'I used to be afraid; I became Egyptian'.¹

Women also suffered under neoliberalism. For example, as mothers and wives, women have found it increasingly difficult to balance the family budget and make ends meet in a context where food prices have been rising since 2008 and incomes

have been eroded by inflation. According to an article in Al-Ahram Weekly last year, 'the minimum wage in Egypt has remained the same for the past 26 years, and with the rise in the prices of food and other commodities nearly half of Egyptian wage-earners are finding it difficult to meet basic food needs. Even families with two wage-earners have been driven below the [LE12 per day] poverty line.' This has meant that even middle class families have had to cut back on eating meat and dairy food and even fresh fruits and vegetables.ⁱⁱ

In a context where state spending on health, education and other social services has been cut back, women often have to step in to fill the gaps left by the withdrawal of state provided social services. Moreover, it is also women who often take on the responsibility of dealing with government agencies in order to access social security payments, where available.

Increasing rates of female unemployment, particularly amongst women, have been caused by the shrinking of the public sector, the downsizing of its workforce and the erosion of public sector pay. Historically, the largest employer of women has been the public sector due to good pay and conditions, including provisions on maternity leave.

What is important is not just that neoliberal economics had gendered effects, which were intensified by class position. Neoliberal economic reforms resulted in a gaping contradiction between the needs of capital and the possibility of sustainable social reproduction. Based on the definition of the feminist economist Isabella Bakker, social reproduction is the biological reproduction, reproduction of labour power and social practices connected to caring, socialization and the fulfilment of human needs.

As Isabella Bakker and Stephen Gill state, 'This involves public policy and provisioning associated with health, education, welfare and socialization of risk, institutions and relations that shape how the social, political and moral order are understood and evaluated.' (Gill & Bakker, *Power, Production and Social Reproduction*: 4). A central element of social reproduction for many people around the world has been and continues to be marriage and establishing a household, including having a family. Neoliberal economic reforms have made it increasingly difficult for existing families and almost impossible for young people to start their own families. Young people, faced with unemployment, underemployment, rising costs, and stagnant incomes have been forced into a prolonged adolescence, in which they remain dependent on their families and unable to start their own households. Diane Singerman has documented this phenomenon, which she calls 'waithood' (Singerman, *The Economic Imperatives of Marriage*, paper of the Middle East Youth Initiative, 2007).

Increasingly assertive civil society

Our government, alongside the US and other European governments, helped to sow the seeds for the Arab revolutions by their support for neoliberal economic reforms. However, these changes were not sufficient prerequisites for the Arab spring. Rather, it is the growing resistance by the Arab people to their regimes that paved the way for the uprisings across the Arab world.

This began in 2000, when there were large public protests against Israel's policies in the Palestinian occupied territories and in solidarity with the second intifada. These were the largest and most radical spontaneous demonstrations in the Arab world since the first Gulf War and were mainly led by students, rather than by political

parties or civil society groups. In Egypt, thousands of students took to the streets on a daily basis, despite police repression, chanting, 'With our souls and with our blood, we sacrifice ourselves for Palestine'.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Egyptian Popular Committee for Solidarity with Palestine was formed soon after the outbreak of the second intifada by a group of 20 NGOs and individuals of diverse political and ideological backgrounds. Many of these groups and individuals were involved in organising the first international conference against US Aggression on Iraq in December 2002.^{iv} In turn, the founders of the conference were amongst the hundreds of thousands of people across the Arab world that demonstrated against the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Cairo conference became an annual event not only against the Iraq invasion but against US imperialism, Zionism and neoliberalism. It brought together leftists, nationalists and Islamists in new alliances that helped to strengthen opposition to the regime.

Many of those involved in the Egyptian Popular Committee, the Cairo conference and the anti-war demonstrations were central to the formation of a movement for political reform called Kifaya (meaning 'enough' in Arabic). From 2004, street protests took place on a regular basis calling for an end to the regime's grip on all areas of life, from usually quiet quarters, such as judges and academics, as well as journalists, artists and trade unionists.^v These street protests for political reform, unprecedented in Egypt, provided an important impetus for widening pro-democracy activism within Egypt.

In addition, between 2006 and 2008, there was a wave of protests and strikes by workers for better pay and conditions. According to labour historian, Joel Beinin, some 2 million Egyptian workers participated in 2,623 protests, strikes and other

forms of collective action between 1998 and 2008. The number of protests and actions more than doubled after 2004, compared to 1998-2003 (approximately 265 per year), corresponding with the intensification of neoliberal economic reforms. Workers have protested against potential job losses, low wages, delays in the payment of bonuses and other allowances which actually make Egyptian wages adequate. These protests have been staged beyond the national federation of trade unions – the only official trade union body, which was controlled by the regime and never supported workers' collective actions. In 2006-2008, workers' protests were remarkable for the role that women played in leading them. In many cases, women camped out or slept inside their factories as part of worker occupations and strikes.

In January 2011, all of these different groups came together to lead demonstrations against the Egyptian regime. The results were beyond anything ever hoped for by the demonstration organisers. The key slogan of the 25 January uprising was, 'The people want the downfall of the regime'.

The decisive break of the previous social contract

The mass demonstrations that took place in Egypt and the call for the downfall of the regime signalled a decisive break from the social contract that historically existed between the regime and its citizens since Egypt gained independence in 1952. The emergence of authoritarianism in the Arab world is linked to the region's particular experience of state formation under European colonialism and state-building in the post-independence period. State building aimed at addressing 3 problems that were a legacy of the creation of states by European colonizers after the First World War: lack of internal legitimacy, fragility of sovereignty and lack of modernisation. In the process of ridding their countries of colonial influence, regimes in Egypt, Algeria,

Tunisia, Syria and Iraq repressed large landowners and other groups (such as religious minorities) associated with colonial privilege. Meanwhile, they co-opted workers, peasants, the middle classes and the military whose productive efforts were deemed essential for national modernisation. The old oligarchy was politically excluded whilst the popular coalition of forces were mobilised through regime-directed corporatist organisations, such as national federations of trade unions and peasant unions. The cooption of the 'popular coalition of forces' through the extension of socio-economic and welfare benefits also aimed at building loyalty amongst citizens for what were, on the whole, new states. However, this inclusion was structured in a way that suppressed competition and subordinated these groups to the direction of the regimes. Regime powers were enhanced by the concentration of economic resources in their hands due to the huge expansion of the public sector and bureaucracy (implemented as part of national modernisation efforts). In other words, national modernisation, national sovereignty and the co-option of a cross-class alliance were interlinked in the state-building process, which, in turn, underpinned authoritarian rule.

This relationship between regimes and their citizens relied upon the consent of citizens. For Nazih Ayubi, the most important factor in enabling elites to secure the consent of citizens for the building of authoritarian rule was the state's provision of socio-economic benefits, such as universal healthcare, education, workplace benefits and subsidized goods and services, enabled by the expansion of the public sector in the early years of independence (Ayubi, *Overstating the Arab State*, 1995: 35). The provision of these benefits served to integrate citizens into the state and to lend credence to the populist-nationalist discourse of regimes. In addition, Arab regimes constructed mass-based and functionally-defined corporatist institutions,

which appeared to include workers, peasants and other working people politically in the national modernisation project (Ayubi 1995: 209). An implicit social contract was struck whereby citizens ceded the exercise of political and civil rights for the consumption of social and economic benefits (Singerman 1995: 245). This socio-economic inclusion compensated for the lack of real political participation (Ayubi 1995: 33). Simultaneously, it rendered the regime's legitimacy dependent upon its economic performance (ibid: 31–32).

By the end of the 1960s, the development strategy underpinning this social contract began to falter. In the 1970s, President Sadat of Egypt introduced economic reforms called *infitah*, which opened up Egypt to foreign private investment. As a result of this, there was some cutback in the socio-economic benefits previously enjoyed by Egyptians. There were protests by workers and riots against rising bread prices. However, many Egyptians were able to cope with this deterioration in the conditions of social reproduction through migration to the Gulf countries for work and the increasing participation of women in the workforce. The assassination of Sadat in 1981 and his replacement with Hosni Mubarak ushered in a brief period of optimism that things would change for the better. However, as I have described, Mubarak was unable to stop Egypt's growing debts and to put the Egyptian economy on a better footing. Consequently, in 1991, Egypt, like many countries, was forced to adopt structural adjustment policies.

The Egyptian regime was faced with a problem—how to continue the social contract and implement the structural adjustment measures that would reduce state provision of important socio-economic and welfare benefits, without provoking widespread social unrest and opposition to the regime. This dilemma led the regime to proceed

slowly with economic reforms in the 1990s. However, during this period, the regime began to forge new relations with business elites and to draw them into nepotistic relations. This is highlighted by the increasing number of businessmen that entered parliament as MPs as well as their appointment to the government. As my PhD student, Safinaz el-Tarouty documents in her thesis, the regime enabled businessmen to benefit from the sales of public sector industries, often below their market value, whilst these business men have provided a new source of finance for regimes, in the form of funding for election campaigns. However, regimes could never replace broad populist support with narrow business elites and expect to hold on to power. Hence, the various manipulations of elections, opposition parties, etc., coupled with other limits on civil and political freedoms. From the 1990s onwards, the regime changed a variety of laws to stifle democratic competition within professional syndicates and trade unions. These authoritarian measures were justified on the basis of preventing Islamists from coming to power. One of the remaining pillars of legitimacy for the regime was foreign policy and its sometimes vocal opposition to US and Israeli policies. However, that changed after 2003. The US-led invasion of Iraq changed the geo-political dynamics of the Middle East. Iran had previously been kept in check by Saddam Hussein's regime. With the removal of that regime, Iran's influence has been empowered. As a wikileaks cable noted, the Egyptian regime regarded Iran as the greatest strategic threat in the region, not necessarily because of its nuclear ambitions but because of its support for Hamas and Hizbollah as proxies to spread Iranian influence in the region. This perception pushed the Egyptian regime to upgrade its cooperation with Israel—an example being its cooperation in enforcing the blockade of Gaza. Egypt began selling natural gas to Israel. It blamed Hizbollah for the July War in 2006, in which Israel caused

massive destruction to Lebanon and killed over 1000 Lebanese. It blamed Hamas for the war in 2008/09, which caused even greater destruction. This shift in Egypt's foreign policies lost it a lot of credibility amongst Egyptians.

The mass protests and defiance of the security and police forces demonstrated the degree to which people no longer believed in the social contract of authoritarianism and no longer regarded the regime's mechanisms of coercion as legitimate.

On 11 February, the protesters achieved their most significant demand: for President Hosni Mubarak to step down. The determination and bravery of protesters in Egypt and other Arab countries is notable against the backdrop of the growing authoritarianism of Arab regimes after 2000, particularly in the name of 'counter-terrorism'. A report by the UN special rapporteur on the protection of human rights while countering terrorism, in his report of 2010, observed that the vague definition of terrorism in Tunisia was enabling repression of legitimate freedom of expression and that there was a lack of judicial oversight of police detention, making detainees vulnerable to torture. In Egypt, measures used to suppress an Islamist insurgency during the 1990s, such as trials of civilians in military courts, were adopted for peaceful opponents of the regime. Security forces grew in size and increasingly acted with impunity. Jason Brownlee, a US political scientist, states: 'If the Egyptian repressive apparatus were a country it would be more populous than Qatar (including non-citizens). Estimates of recent years put the Ministry of Interior's personnel at 1.5 million, not including informants. Egypt's top cop thus commands a staff almost four times as large as the Egyptian military. His resources are equally prodigious. While forty percent of Egyptians lived on less than \$2 a day, the annual budget of Minister of Interior Habib Al Adly (1997-2011) had recently topped \$1

billion and begun outpacing the army's revenue stream.' (cit. in http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2059/egypts-incomplete-revolution_the-challenge-of-post). US-Egyptian political scientist Samer Shehata describes, 'Abuse by security personnel took both small and large forms: in daily interactions with the police, on the street, at traffic stops, and police checkpoints, to more serious cases involving torture and human rights violations.^[iii] The arbitrary exercise of authority was widespread. In the absence of any real accountability, security officials acted with near impunity. Suspected criminals were routinely mistreated, especially those accused of petty crimes. Heavy-handed techniques were the norm. Police stations were feared by many. Few rights or protections were afforded, especially to those without connections or money. And corruption was endemic.'

(http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2219/roundtable-on-post-mubarak-egypt_authoritarianism-#Samer). As I hinted to before, the majority of the victims of these police tactics were working class men, particularly, young men.

Despite, or maybe because of, the extent of the security state in countries like Egypt and Tunisia, these regimes were supported by the US and its allies in the name of 'counter-terrorism'. Egypt, Jordan and Syria have all been destinations for extraordinary rendition and torture of men suspected by the US of terrorism. Arms exports from EU member countries to Libya, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco have risen significantly over the past five years. Arms export licences from the EU to the four countries rose from \$1.3bn to \$2.7bn in 2009, according to Campaign Against the Arms Trade (cit. in

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2011/02/201121310169828350.html>).

Arab regimes have used the threat of Islamists coming to power in order to justify to the West their denial of citizen freedoms and rights.

Against these odds demonstrators in Egypt and other countries have been successful in mobilising widescale opposition to their dictators. In Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, dictators have been unseated. Nevertheless, this does not automatically signal the end of dictatorship and the beginning of democracy. In Egypt, the demands of protesters have not yet been met:

- The lifting of the emergency law
- the creation of an inclusive transitional government
- the holding of free and fair elections
- constitutional reforms that guarantee the principles of freedom and social justice
- the release of all political detainees and prosecuting those responsible for killing protesters
- raising the minimum wage.

With the exception of the minimum wage, which has been increased but not to the levels demanded by protesters, these demands have yet to be fully met.

Elections to the parliament are supposed to be held on 28 November –but there is much tension over the electoral law drafted by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces as well as a lack of rules in place for funding of election campaigns. This doesn't bode well for the fairness of the elections. Meanwhile, the free-ness of the elections is called into question by continuing human rights abuses in post-Mubarak Egypt. These include intimidation of journalists critical of SCAF, harassment and prosecution of activists and bloggers, military trials of civilians, and the failure of SCAF to stop threats against Coptic Christians by Salafis. More recently, SCAF was even implicated in violence against a mainly

Coptic Christians demonstration, which resulted in 27 dead and many more injured. This is why protests are continuing in Egypt and people are now demanding the end of military rule.

The vast majority of scholars are treating the Arab uprisings as transitions away from authoritarianism and, hopefully, towards democracy. As a result, many are seeking to explain events there in terms of the well-established 'transitions paradigm'. The defining features of the transitions paradigm, based on the four volume 'Transitions from Authoritarian Rule', published in 1986, and edited by Guillermo O'Donnell and others, is the focus on ruling elites and the military as shaping the nature of transitions away from authoritarianism. Already, we are seeing the influence of the transitions paradigm with regards to coverage and commentary of the Arab Spring. There has been a lot of focus on the military, on political parties, and on business elites. Whilst it is important to examine these actors, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that only these actors count in shaping the course of the Arab spring. The Arab people have not gone back to their homes because their dictators have gone. They have been empowered by their successes so far and want to continue until they achieve all the rights that they have been demanding. In Egypt, in workplaces across the country, employees have been striking and protesting for better wages and also for greater democracy in their workplace. There have been strikes by teachers, transport workers and protests by medical professionals. University lecturers have got rid of faculty deans previously appointed by Mubarak. The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, the media and the Muslim Brotherhood have condemned workers' protests as undermining the revolution. But workers and professionals see their continuing struggles as necessary for the success of the

revolution. Demonstrations continue in Tahrir Square and activists continue to speak out despite attempts by the military rulers to stamp out dissent.

The greatest threat to establishing democracy in Egypt and other Arab countries will be if civil society stops resisting authoritarianism. For a long time, civil society in the Arab world was a space where consent for the rule of authoritarian regimes was manufactured. Now, civil society has become the space where authoritarianism is resisted. This gives me hope that the Arab uprisings are heading towards a brighter future for the people there.

ⁱ See Karima Khalil, ed. *Messages from Tahrir Square: Signs from Egypt's Revolution*, Cairo: AUC Press, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Amany Abdel-Moneim, 'Food prices shooting up', Al Ahram Weekly Online, 14-20 October 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ 'Anger Across the Arab World', BBC News Online, 12 October 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/968941.stm, accessed 21/06/05.

^{iv} Omayma Abdel-Latif, 'Raising a Voice', Al-Ahram Weekly Online, 26 Dec 2002–1 Jan 2003, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2002/618/sc1.htm>, accessed 15/06/05.

^v Mona Salem, 'Reform groups mushroom in Egypt to shake off state grip', Agence France Presse, 6 June 2005.