

Understanding the Arab Spring

Nicola Pratt, 24 November 2011

1. Tendency amongst commentators and some scholars to view Arab Spring as a result of globalization of democratic norms, new media technologies, educated and globalised and digital-savvy youth as main agent of change. The implicit assumption is that the West understands the Arab Spring in terms of 'Western' norms and values. Prevalent orientalist attitudes amongst commentators and policy makers and even some scholars, cannot accommodate explanations that the Arab spring is actually the result of domestic structural change. The role of the West has been one of indirectly mobilising popular opinion and even demonstrations against Western policies such as the invasion of Iraq, western support for Israel and western backing of authoritarian regimes like Ben Ali's in Tunisia and Mubarak's in Egypt.
2. The mass demonstrations that have taken place in Tunisia, Egypt and other Arab countries, calling for the downfall of the regime, have signalled a decisive break from the social contract that historically existed between the regime and its citizens since independence after the Second World War. This social contract consisted of the regime providing important socio-economic benefits to its citizens in return for their obedience. Political opposition was coopted or repressed. Citizens were recognised for their contribution to national modernization—in particular, workers, peasants, the middle classes, and intelligentsia. From 1990s onwards, many regimes were forced to implement neo-liberal economic reforms and were no longer able to provide the socio-economic benefits that they once did. Moreover, regimes turned

away from even rhetorical support of workers, peasants and the middle classes and focused their attention on the newly emerging business class, who were the beneficiaries of the privatization of public sector enterprises. To compensate for the shrinking of its base of support, regimes relied increasingly on police and security services to monitor and repress the majority of the population. It is this shift in the political economy of post-independence Arab states that provides the framework for understanding the Arab spring.

3. The majority of scholars who are now studying the Arab spring 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 '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 elites, as well as institutions, such as, elections and constitutions. Whilst it is important to examine these factors, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that only these count in shaping the course of the Arab spring. The Arab people have not gone back to their homes because their dictators have gone (as we see in Egypt now). Since Friday, Egyptians have returned to Tahrir Square by the thousands calling for the removal of the military council. More than 30 people have been killed and more than 2000 injured in clashes with the police. But

people are determined. They do not want a fake democracy but a real democracy where political power is in the hands of the people. The Supreme Council has been forced to respond to the demands of protesters by making concessions (albeit insufficient concessions at the time of writing).

4. Moreover, we should not assume that the Arab spring is only a political transition and that people are calling for the sort of low-intensity democracy that exists in much of the world. A large number of people in the Arab world are not merely seeking political change – they want a revolution and that is what they call their uprisings. They have been empowered by their successes so far and want to continue until they achieve all the rights that they have been demanding. Since February, in workplaces across the country, employees have been striking and protesting for better wages and for greater democracy in their workplaces. 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 their revolution to succeed.

For me, it is the historical contingency between structural changes in the region's political economy and the emergence of an assertive civil society (rather than, the youth bulge or social media) that help us to understand the Arab Spring. I would argue that it is civil society that will shape the consequences of the Arab spring. 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.