

THE PERMANENCE OF ARAB UPRISINGS

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Africa

Arab politics remains defiant. Eight years after protests swept through the Arab street toppling several dictators, anti-government demonstrations erupted in Sudan and Algeria (*picture*) in recent months. Earlier this month, both Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had ruled Algeria for 20 years, and Omar al-Bashir, who had been at the helm in Sudan for three decades, quit amid public anger, reviving memories of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings earlier. When protests broke out in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread to other countries, there were hopes that the Arab world was in for massive changes. The expectation was that in countries where people rose, such as Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain and Syria, the old autocracies would be replaced with new democracies. But except Tunisia, the country-specific stories of the Arab uprising were tragic.

These tragedies, however, did not kill the revolutionary spirit of the Arab youth, as the protests in Sudan and Algeria show. Rather, there's continuity from Tunis to Khartoum and Algiers. The Arab uprising was originally triggered by a combination of factors. The economic model based on patronage was crumbling in these countries. The rulers had been in power for decades, and there was popular longing for freedom from their repressive regimes. More important, the protests were transnational in nature, though the targets of the revolutionaries were their respective national governments. The driving force behind the protests was a pan-Arabist anger against the old system. That's why it spread like wildfire from Tunis to Cairo, Benghazi and Manama. They may have failed to reshape the Arab political order, but the embers of the uprisings appear to have survived the tragedy of 'Arab Spring'.

Most Arab economies are beset with economic woes. The rentier system Arab monarchs and dictators built is in a bad shape. Arab rulers for years bought loyalty of the masses in return for patronage, which was then buttressed by the fear factor. This model is no more viable. If Arab countries were shaken by the 2010-11 protests, they would be thrown into another crisis in 2014, with the fall in oil prices. Having touched \$140 a barrel in 2008, the price of oil collapsed to \$30 in 2016. This impacted both oil-producing and oil-importing countries. Producers, reeling under the price fall, had cut spending — both public spending and aid for other Arab countries. Non-oil-producing Arab economies such as Jordan and Egypt saw aid that they were dependent on drying up. In May 2018, there were massive protests in Jordan against a proposed tax law and rising fuel prices. Demonstrators left the streets only after Prime Minister Hani Mulki resigned, his successor withdrew the legislation and King Abdullah II made an intervention to freeze the price hike.

In Sudan and Algeria, protesters have gone a step ahead, demanding regime change, like their comrades in Egypt and Tunisia did in late 2010 and early 2011. Algeria, whose economy is heavily dependent on the hydrocarbon sector, took a hit after the post-2014 commodity meltdown. While GDP growth slowed from 4% in 2014 to 1.6% in 2017, youth unemployment soared to 29%. This economic downturn was happening at a time when Mr. Bouteflika was missing from public engagement. A stroke had paralysed him in 2013. But when he announced candidacy for this year's presidential election, seeking another five-year term, it infuriated the public. In a matter of days, protests spread across the country, which culminated in his resignation on April 2.

Sudan's case is not different. The northeast African country is also battling a serious economic crisis. Mr. Bashir and his military clique ruled the country through fear for three decades. But the split of South Sudan in 2011, with three-fourths of the undivided country's oil reserves, broke the

back of the junta. Post-2014, Sudan fell into a deeper crisis, often seeking aid from richer Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and even Qatar, the Saudi bloc's regional rival. Inflation is at 73%. Sudan is also grappling with fuel and cash shortages. Discontent first boiled over in the northeastern city Atbara in mid-December over the rising price of bread, and the protests soon spread into a nationwide movement. Mr. Bashir tried everything he could to calm the streets — from declaring a state of emergency to sacking his entire cabinet — but protesters demanded nothing less than regime change. Finally the army stepped in, removing him from power on April 11.

Like in the case of 2010-11, the 2018-19 protests are also transnational — they spread from Amman to Khartoum and Algiers in a matter of months. The pan-Arabist anger against national governments remains the main driving force behind the protests, which should set alarm bells ringing across Arab capitals. But in all these countries, the counter-revolutionary forces are so strong that protesters often stop short of achieving their main goal — a clear break with the past. They manage to get rid of the dictators, but the system those dictators built survives somehow, and sometimes in a moral brutal fashion. There are two main counter-revolutionary forces in these countries. The first are the main guardians of the old system, either the monarchy or the army. Tunisia is the only country where the revolutionaries outwitted the counter-revolutionaries. They overthrew Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's dictatorship, and the country transitioned to a multi-party democracy. In Egypt, the army made a comeback and further tightened its grip on the state and society through violence and repression. In Jordan, the monarch always acts as a bulwark against revolutionary tendencies.

The second are geopolitical actors. In Libya, the foreign intervention removed Muammar Qaddafi, but the war destroyed the Libyan state and institutions, leaving the country in the hands of competing militias. Libya is yet to recover from the anarchy triggered by the intervention. In Syria, with foreign intervention, the protests first turned into an armed civil war and then the country itself became a theatre of wars for global players. In Yemen, protests turned into a sectarian civil conflict, with foreign powers taking different sides. In Bahrain, Saudi Arabia made a direct military intervention, on behalf of its rulers, to violently end the protests in Manama's Pearl Square.

The same could happen in Algeria and Sudan as well. In both countries, the army let the Presidents fall, but retained its grip on power, despite pressure from protesters. They don't want regime change. They are dressing up the fall of the dictator as a revolution and selling it to the protesters, just as the Egyptian military did eight years ago. Sudan faces the heat of geopolitical intervention as well. As soon as the military council directly took power, Saudi Arabia, the U.A.E. and Egypt offered support to the military, at a time when protests continue in Khartoum demanding an immediate handover of power to a civilian government. The Saudis have also announced an aid package to the new junta, making it clear who they prefer.

This is the challenge before the Arab protesters. They are angry. They want the system to be changed. But they are the multitudes. There's no vanguard of the revolution. While they keep rising up against the system, they are constantly being pushed back by the counter-revolutionaries.

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