

# The Arab 1989?

David Held  
*Durham University*  
Kristian Coates-Ulrichsen  
*London School of Economics and Political Science*

An extraordinary wave of upheaval is beginning to sweep across the Arab world, with the potential to transform the political order in the Middle East. Mohamed Bouazizi's desperate act of self-immolation galvanised a generation of marginalised youth to demand political freedom, economic opportunity and above all a sense of human dignity. Millions participated in massive demonstrations that ousted the Ben Ali kleptocracy in Tunisia and heralded the end of the Mubarak regime in Egypt. This turn of events has inspired people to mobilise against repressive autocracies across the Middle East and North Africa. Moreover, the protests directly contradict the myths long spun by these regimes that their secular strong-men are both the guarantors of stability and the only bulwark against a fanatical Islamist takeover. Men, women and children from all backgrounds, classes and levels of education cooperated in non-violent calls for change. The resulting outcome could be transformative in its impact on a regional order that has, for decades, elevated regime and Western stability above the democratic and participatory desires of its inhabitants.

Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December after his street stall was confiscated and he was humiliated by local authorities in his hometown of Sidi Bouzid. His plight resonated heavily with young Tunisians facing similar despair with their economic situation and lack of prospects for a better future. Protests began in conservative and rural regions of Tunisia and gradually spread to the cities where they intersected with rising social

tensions and anger at the escalating cost of food and basic services. New media and social networking websites acted as powerful transmitters enabling activists, bloggers and journalists to bypass the security services' repressive crackdown. The gradual convergence of socio-economic and political dissent widened the scope of the protestors' demands to include the tackling of corruption and granting of political freedoms. Ben Ali responded with incremental concessions that culminated in a pledge not to seek re-election as President in 2014. When the Tunisian military refused to intervene and suppress the protests, Ben Ali was forced to flee to Saudi Arabia on 14 January, and was replaced by a transitional unity government ahead of planned elections.

Demonstrations in Egypt started on 25 January with the organisation of a 'Day of Anger' in major cities. As in Tunisia, a trigger (in this instance the ousting of Ben Ali) ignited popular frustration with the Mubarak regime's perceived inability to address deep social and economic problems. The protests escalated into a 'Day of Rage' when thousands of demonstrators overpowered the police and security services and burned symbols of the regime across the country. Previously fragmented opposition groups coalesced behind Mohamed El-Baradei (the former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency and head of the National Association of Change) and demanded immediate political change. A remarkable feature of the crowds was their commitment to non-violence and ad hoc organisation of relief and other basic services to

ensure orderly protests. Muslims and Christians stood side by side in unity and prayer and notably sported Egyptian flags rather than religious symbols. The military acknowledged the protests' legitimacy and Mubarak was forced into conceding ever-greater checks on his power. These culminated in his announcement to stand down as President following the 'March of the Millions' on 1 February, when two million demonstrated in Cairo and several million more throughout Egypt demanded an immediate political transition. In response, pro-Mubarak thugs carried out indiscriminate attacks inflicting more than 1200 casualties and contrasting starkly with the peaceful non-violent nature of the anti-Mubarak demonstrations. This was a desperate act of a beleaguered autocrat and belatedly led the international community to abandon its support for Mubarak.

The political contagion has spread throughout the Arab world although it is strongest in countries where authoritarian regimes have limited fiscal and monetary revenues to defuse popular frustration. In Jordan, rising inflation and high unemployment and poverty levels were causing significant hardship and anti-government feeling long before the outbreak of overtly political protests. These squeezed hardest the middle- and lower-income groups that formed the core of the Arab world's wave of mobilisation. Jordan's lively media and social networking sphere also differed markedly from the conservative and tribal composition of the parliament returned in elections boycotted by secular and Islamist opposition groups in November 2010. A generational clash emerged between young activists spanning the religious and ideological spectrum and the monarchy seeking to deflect their frustration onto the parliament. King Abdullah fired the government of Samir Al-Rifai and appointed an ex-army general in his place. This was a strategic move to de-link potential political opposition to the monarchy from economic discontent by channelling the blame for rising socio-economic unrest onto the technocrats. The monarchy also benefits from the split within Jordan between East Bank tribes and formerly-West Bank Palestinians, which represents a safety valve

insulating it from a mass popular uprising on the Tunisian or Egyptian scale.

In Yemen, protests initially focused on rampant unemployment and especially bleak economic conditions in a country wracked by internal conflict and fast running out of oil and water. Opposition anger was also directed toward President Ali Abdullah Saleh's controversial constitutional amendment in January 2011. This removed the two-term presidential limit and cleared the way for him to run for re-election in 2013. In this context, the protestors' success in extracting a pledge that he would neither seek re-election nor attempt to transfer power to his son was significant. Saleh has twice before broken promises to step down and it remains to be seen whether he will act differently on this occasion. Notably, however, his concession failed to take the sting out of the demonstrations, which instead became more emboldened as events unfolded in Egypt. Saleh lacks the political legitimacy to placate the broad-based opposition to his increasingly repressive 32-year rule, but has thus far taken advantage of opposition disunity to prevent a serious challenge to his rule. Pressure is nevertheless building up in a context in which the regime already faces armed contestation to its rule, and in which nobody seriously believes it will follow-through on meaningful reform.

Popular demand for change is spreading across the Middle East. Throughout the region a fault-line has opened up between young populations exposed to global modernising forces through the internet and satellite television and ossified, oppressive regimes unable to provide opportunities or the reality of a better life. 65% of the population of the Middle East is under the age of 30 and are increasingly technology-savvy and adept at using new forms of communication to bypass state controls and mobilise around common issues or grievances. Bloggers in Egypt and Tunisia were instrumental in publicising and spreading accounts of torture and human rights violations by the security services. They emboldened people everywhere to band together and confront the regimes that had ruled with an iron fist. A decisive threshold has been crossed and, once opened, this Pandora's Box will be almost impossible to re-seal.

Nor, in the age of Twitter and Al-Jazeera providing live-streaming of events across the globe, is it possible for regimes to seal themselves off from the outside world while they take retribution on their opponents, as when the Syrian regime massacred thousands of its domestic opponents in Hama in 1982. Caught between the spotlight of instant global media and an energised and youthful social movement, these police states are being exposed as anachronistic, brittle and incapable of meeting the requirements of modern societies.

This is the storm moving through the Middle East and radically reshaping the nature of state-society relations. Crucially, the uprisings are popular movements emerging organically from below in response to local socio-economic and political conditions. They therefore differ fundamentally from the military-led revolutions from above that swept away the colonial regimes in the 1950s and 1960s and entrenched in power praetorian leaderships built around the military and security apparatus. In addition they are unconnected either to the US-led democratising agenda or the opposing forces in the 'war on terror.' They thus have great popular legitimacy in a region that has witnessed numerous recent examples of external interventions that have tarnished local perceptions of 'democracy.' Moreover, the sight of regimes and leaders long denounced by Osama bin Laden being toppled through peaceful and largely-secular mass protests demonstrates just how marginalised Al-Qaeda and jihadist ideology really is. Notably, demonstrators chanting in Cairo called for 'tanmiyya' (development) and 'hurriya' (freedom), often drowning out more overtly religious slogans. It is this realisation that so threatens the confluence of Western and regime interests around the fallacy that democracy cannot be a stable alternative to embedded authoritarian regimes.

What caused this cascade of popular rejection of a status quo that for so long appeared set in stone? Moments of revolutionary change often occur when specific triggers interact with slower but no less significant changes gradually taking place. The seemingly random act of Bouazizi's self-immolation was the catalyst for popular revulsion at the marked inequities and indignities they encountered on a

daily basis. Just as the assassin's bullet that felled Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in June 1914 set in motion the train of events that led to the outbreak of the First World War, the mushrooming anger following Bouazizi's death engineered the convergence of socio-economic hardship with political grievances. In both instances, a constellation of internal and external events exacerbated existing schisms and reconfigured the dynamics and interaction of longer-term processes. The result is that while discontent in these authoritarian regimes is not new, it is the speed with which they have threatened to bring several of them to the brink of collapse that is qualitatively different.

Different dynamics have driven the specific course of the protests from country to country. In some, the possession of substantial oil and gas revenues provide a degree of insulation to regimes able to pre-empt or defuse protest by increasing the redistribution of wealth. Kuwait's gift of free food rations for 14 months and a one-off payment of 1000 Kuwaiti dinars (approximately \$3500) to every citizen is the most blatant such example. Similar outlets exist in most of the other Gulf States (with the notable exception of Bahrain, which sees its own 'Day of Rage' on 14 February), blunting though not preventing dissatisfaction with socio-economic stagnation. In Libya, more pronounced tribalism has drawn larger circles of people into the regime's orbit and given them a stake in its survival. Memories of the decade of civil conflict that killed more than 150,000 people in Algeria in the 1990s make Algerians understandably wary of sudden change, while, as with Libya, its hydrocarbon and foreign exchange reserves give the regime greater manoeuvrability when addressing rising living costs. Meanwhile in Morocco the religious legitimacy that the King derives from being a direct descendant of the Prophet insulates the institution of the monarchy from direct criticism.

These differences aside, all the above countries have also seen protests spreading beyond the normally carefully-defined parameters of opposition. Several threads link the character of the social movement redrawing the regional political

landscape. Their commonality heightens the infectious overspill as each individual extraction of concessions energises the movement elsewhere. Deep underlying socio-economic issues run through the region and constitute the Achilles heel in the 'ruling bargain' between autocratic rulers and their impoverished citizenry. Sclerotic labour markets are unable to generate anything like the sufficient number of jobs to absorb the large numbers of young people coming of age. Youth unemployment in Saudi Arabia, for example, is an estimated 43% for 20-24 year olds, and figures exceeding 30% are replicated across the Middle East. The result is dashed expectations for a generation of youth that are better educated and more aware of alternative pathways than ever. Regimes are endangered by the interlinking of socio-economic frustrations with a widespread belief that advancement under current conditions is impossible. One chant in Cairo's Tahrir Square encapsulated the feelings of utter helplessness at the status quo: 'We are prepared to die because we are already dead.'

Anger at regimes' perceived inability to address economic stagnation has also targeted issues of corruption and inequalities in social mobility. This was a lightning-rod of dissent in the rapid escalation of the demonstrations against Ben Ali in Tunisia. The popular outpouring of rage directed against the President and his wife's family was succinctly (if inadvertently) summarised in a leaked US diplomatic cable as a 'What's yours is mine' culture of avarice. Rising prices of food, fuel and basic everyday services sharpened anger at corrupt officials and the states they represented, as their opulent lifestyles and ostentatious wealth clashed with lower and middle-income groups whose margin of subsistence had been eroded by inflationary pressures. From Morocco to the Gulf, the internet and tools of new media opened up discussions about the enormous and widening gap between social classes and the disparities in wealth and incomes between the 'haves' and 'have-nots.' They resonate most strongly among youthful populations, whose greater exposure to non-state controlled viewpoints coexists with their exclusion from economic opportunities by corruption and other barriers to meritocracy.

New media and advances in communications technologies are transforming the terms of the debates between rulers and ruled. Regimes' control over the flow of information has rapidly eroded under the pressures of globalisation. In Egypt, the government cut off the country's internet service providers and tried to prevent Al-Jazeera from broadcasting. These were desperate measures that backfired as the protests continued, and they inflicted enormous damage to the regime's international and economic credibility. Nevertheless it demonstrated the intense vulnerability of autocracies to new methods of holding them to account publicly. Blogging, social networking, and encrypted communications technologies such as Skype and BlackBerry enable suppressed and marginalised voices to make themselves heard to wide audiences both locally and around the world. This undermines governments' tried-and-tested stifling of dissent and opposition narratives.

The synthesis of new media and younger populations is therefore dismantling the system of controls and filters carefully constructed and maintained by ministries of information and government media. Together they are shining a light into murky authoritarian depths and providing new forms of private, public and virtual space in which activists can mobilise, organise and channel participatory demands. Al-Jazeera's online streaming of the popular revolution in Egypt saw its viewing figures all over the world increase by 2500%. Similarly, they represent new forums for debate and coordination of activities that stretch across national boundaries and overcome barriers of time and space. These trends are reconfiguring the composition of opposition movements and facilitating the linking of social and economic grievances to demands for political reform. The resulting realignments are transformative in their broad dissemination of messages that far exceed – and bring together – hitherto narrowly-based oppositional groups in (temporary) coalitions of sustained protest.

Conflicts and moments of rupture often are sparked by the convergence of external pressures and internal fissures. Rising food and commodity prices exacerbated schisms within societies and widened

existing fault-lines between authoritarian regimes and their citizens. The role of new media in documenting and transmitting the feelings of shame and humiliation that drove Bouazizi to his death also hit a very deep nerve in people across the region. This intersection of a lost generation bereft of hope for a better life with the hyper-modernising forces of the internet and satellite television hits the tired, elderly regimes at their weakest point. It exposes their manifest failure to govern freely or even fairly and their instinctive reaction to suppress, rather than engage, an increasingly organised and vocal opposition. The Egyptian government's attempt to cut off global communications revealed it to be naïve, anachronistic and completely out of touch with the modern world. It will be harder, now, for regimes to repress and torture dissenters into submission without being held to public (if not yet judicial) account for their actions. This reality is radically eroding the ability of authoritarian leaderships to intimidate domestic opponents, and revealing the fragility of their narrow social base of support after decades of ruling through coercion rather than consent.

Can the upheaval in the Arab world be compared to the revolutions that swept Eastern Europe in 1989? Is this indeed the 'Arab 1989'? While comparisons of events across time and place can be misleading, examining what was distinctive about the events of 1989 can provide some clues to the significance of current events. The political transformation of Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, Poland and Romania were sweeping, dramatic and unexpected. They constituted a revolutionary situation that decisively overturned seemingly immovable regimes in a matter of months. However they were also linked to slow yet significant processes and changes that gathered momentum over the preceding decade. Thus the trajectories that culminated so visibly in the fall of the Iron Curtain and the disintegration of the Soviet bloc in 1989-90 had roots stretching at least to the early 1980s.

Significant political changes were underway in Eastern Europe in the early 1980s. In Poland, the Solidarity trade union movement began in 1980

and spearheaded a mass movement for freedom and self-determination. It survived the regime's attempted repressive crackdown in 1981 and gradually created an independent civil society sphere by fostering independent networks of information, cultural exchange and social relations. Meanwhile the late-1980s also witnessed important shifts in political emphasis in the Soviet Union itself, linked to the perestroika reform process initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev. A profound shift in strategic thinking occurred, from the Brezhnev Doctrine (protecting the 'achievements of socialism' by force if necessary, as in Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968 and Poland in 1981) to the Sinatra Doctrine (tolerating nationally chosen paths – 'Do it your way'). This had decisive consequences for the Soviet bloc as the removal of the threat of coercion and Soviet intervention in Eastern Europe accelerated centrifugal forces and eroded regimes' ability to suppress opposition by force.

Emerging schisms also reflected the impact of long-term pressures on the Soviet economy. Soviet economic stagnation stemmed in part from its lack of integration into the world economy, which provided short-term protection from competitive productivity elsewhere but left it weak and uncompetitive in the longer-term. Rigid and relatively inflexible centrally administered structures were put under additional strain by the renewed arms race following the intensification of the Cold War in the early-1980s. This placed a much greater (relative) burden on economic and human resources in the Soviet Union and the crumbling infrastructure of the Soviet economy. The declining economic situation and the move toward toleration of distinctive national pathways to reform constituted a deep 'legitimation crisis' of state socialist societies, and represented a proximate cause of the revolutions in 1989.

How do these events compare or contrast to the unfolding developments in the Arab world? Four common elements and one contrast may be discerned. Economic stagnation in authoritarian Arab economies is rooted in similarly uncompetitive and knowledge-deficient economic structures. With the partial exception of the oil- and gas-producing

states, regional economies are falling further behind at a time of accelerating innovation and knowledge-intensity in the global economy. Many Arab economies have largely been bypassed by processes of globalisation analogous to the Soviet bloc's marginalisation in the world economy in the last century. This initially shielded Arab economies from competitive pressures and from the direct impact of the global financial crisis of 2007-9. However, its deeper significance lies in the general failure of Arab regimes, despite some patchy programmes of 'infitah', to develop sustainable economic structures independent of state support and capable of competing in global markets.

This links to the second commonality, which is the failure of authoritarian regimes to present a viable alternative model for meeting the socio-economic challenges they confront. Structural problems of rampant un- and under-employment, inflexible and stratified labour markets, and profound imbalances between overbearing public and weak private sectors coexist alongside emerging problems posed by rising food and commodity prices, periodic lapses in flows of remittances from expatriate labourers, and volatile revenue streams from external 'rents', whether oil and gas prices or income from tourism. Regimes' inability to offer the prospect of a better quality of life-chances to their increasingly-youthful citizens compounds the difficulties of managing an orderly transition to a new political generation with its own distinctive social and cultural background and differing perceptions and priorities. This occurred in the Soviet bloc in the mid- to late-1980s with the rise to power of Gorbachev. Arab regimes today face the task of reconciling the clash between the old guard and a generation of youth they fail to represent or understand.

Heightened awareness of alternative political and economic pathways to development are a third characteristic common both to 1989 and 2011. Just as the growth of Solidarity in Poland throughout the 1980s, civic activism and reform movements in Hungary and mass petitions and anti-Communist demonstrations in Czechoslovakia in 1988-89 raised expectations of change, so the current revolutionary wave is opening the prospect of a

political reordering in the Arab world. As in 1989, previously-solid assumptions regarding the possibility of regime change are being overturned as long-entrenched leaders fall from power, initiate timetables for hitherto-unthinkable political handovers, and are forced into making substantial concessions limiting their authority. The role of new media in facilitating and transforming the shift in the terms of debate and discourse is quantitatively, but not qualitatively, different from the 1980s, when improvements to communications and changing forms of media also bypassed state controls to penetrate largely-closed societies.

The fourth commonality is the role of religion in providing a mobilising counterforce to stagnating autocratic rule. In Eastern Europe, the Catholic Church played a powerful role in organising and shaping dissent in Poland, while it organised a mass petition in Czechoslovakia in 1987 in support of religious freedom. At the time it represented the largest opposition petition in Eastern Europe and demonstrated the Church's function as a strong opposition group. Islam, too, shares a capacity to organise different voices behind questions of social (as well as religious) justice. Public attention in the West is (wrongly) fixated upon the role of the Muslim Brotherhood and political Islam in allegedly directing the anti-regime protests, but it is undeniably the case that mosques and Friday prayers do provide significant spaces to raise core issues of social and political organisation that regimes would much rather leave untouched.

Nevertheless these four issues are counterbalanced by the very different role of the West and the international community, and by the clarity of the alternative to authoritarianism. People in Eastern Europe in 1989 called for open societies, market forces, public accountability and consumer choice. The alternative to communism was very clear and involved the breaking up of old centrally-organised structures, integration with the West and the international arena, and the creation of democratic governments with market economies. Demonstrators and opposition leaders had a wholly positive view of the United States and the West, which in turn welcomed and embraced the revolutions as they unfolded. The alignment of

interests between Eastern Europe and the West facilitated the political transition toward democratisation and their eventual integration into NATO and the European Union.

No such smooth conformity exists in the interactions between the advocates of change in the Arab world and the West. Relations have been strained by the events of 9/11 and their aftermath. The 'war on terror' involved two Western military interventions into Arab and Islamic states and unleashed chaos and bloodshed in the name of stability and democracy. The crusading zeal of the George W. Bush administration and its British ally polarised feelings in the Arab world and fuelled the militant and extremist ideologies opposing them. Meanwhile the twin spectres of terrorism and the rise of political Islam have complicated the relationship between the Arab world and the international community, as well as the potential role that the West might play in supporting processes of change in the Middle East.

Additional uncertainty stems from the fragmentation of opposition movements. It is not yet clear whether their coalescing behind calls for political change will survive beyond the revolutionary moment. The difficulty of sustaining momentum beyond this point has been amply demonstrated in the messy and incomplete aftermath of the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003-4. Neither do the opposition groups share any great degree of broad agreement about the direction of possible alternatives to autocratic rule. Fundamental differences of opinion exist around critical issues such as attitudes toward Western models and the role of religion in society. Although the cross-unity of purpose between Islamists and secularists has been strikingly prevalent in the demonstrations across the region, these divisions will come to the surface in any transition. Opposition movements are also vulnerable to regime attempts to manipulate and widen these divisions in a continuation of longstanding policies of divide and rule through selective co-optation of groups and demands. Importantly, no Arab equivalent of Gorbachev has emerged as a figurehead for reform within, and eventually beyond, the authoritarian system.

The present is a moment of great promise, opportunity and uncertainty. The Arab world stands at the brink of transformative changes to ossified political regimes and, in increasing numbers, ordinary people are willing to risk their lives to force a break with the past. Demands for reform have shaken the tottering autocrats and brutally exposed their repressive nature in the face of mass calls for political freedom, democracy and human rights. Neither will the taste of freedom of expression and assembly enjoyed by hundreds of thousands of demonstrators be easily contained or re-sealed. Meanwhile the impact of the internet and new media on burgeoning youth populations will only grow over time, making any attempts to cling to the status quo all the more unsustainable. These trajectories will have profound domestic repercussions that will play out over years and decades. On the other hand, Western (and Israeli) nervousness at the weakening of their regional partners may also translate into support for partial reforms that jettison unpopular leaders but sustain underlying authoritarian structures. The choices that will be made in coming weeks and months will largely determine whether the groundswell of demonstrations in the Arab world yield meaningful transitions from autocracy to substantive democratisation, or whether the West continues to prioritise stability over democracy even in the face of such affirmation of universal values by so many people throughout the Arab world.