

Demystifying the Arab Spring

Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya

Lisa Anderson

In Tunisia, protesters escalated calls for the restoration of the country's suspended constitution. Meanwhile, Egyptians rose in revolt as strikes across the country brought daily life to a halt and toppled the government. In Libya, provincial leaders worked feverishly to strengthen their newly independent republic.

It was 1919.

That year's events demonstrate that the global diffusion of information and expectations—so vividly on display in Tahrir Square this past winter—is not a result of the Internet and social media. The inspirational rhetoric of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points speech, which helped spark the 1919 upheavals, made its way around the world by telegraph. The uprisings of 1919 also suggest that the calculated spread of popular movements, seen across the Arab world last winter, is not a new phenomenon. The Egyptian Facebook campaigners are the modern incarnation of Arab nationalist networks whose broadsheets disseminated strategies for civil disobedience throughout the region in the years after World War I.

The important story about the 2011 Arab revolts in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya is not how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters' aspirations. Nor is it about how activists used technology to share ideas and tactics. Instead, the critical issue is how and why these ambitions and techniques resonated in their various local contexts. The patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely. The demonstrations in Tunisia spiraled toward the capital from the neglected rural areas, finding common cause with a once powerful but much repressed labor movement. In Egypt, by contrast, urbane and cosmopolitan young people in the major cities organized the uprisings. Meanwhile, in Libya, ragtag bands of armed rebels in the eastern provinces ignited the protests, revealing the tribal and regional cleavages that have beset the country for decades. Although they shared a common call for personal dignity and responsive government, the revolutions across these three countries reflected divergent economic grievances and social dynamics—legacies of their diverse

LISA ANDERSON is President of the American University in Cairo.

Demystifying the Arab Spring

encounters with modern Europe and decades under unique regimes.

As a result, Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya face vastly different challenges moving forward. Tunisians will need to grapple with the class divisions manifesting themselves in the country's continuing political unrest. Egyptians must redesign their institutions of government. And Libyans will need to recover from a bloody civil war. For the United States to fulfill its goals in the region, it will need to understand these distinctions and distance itself from the idea that the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings constitute a cohesive Arab revolt.

BEN ALI'S TUNISIAN FIEFDOM

The profound differences between the Tunisian, Egyptian, and Libyan uprisings are not always apparent in the popular media. The timing of the popular revolts—so sudden and almost simultaneous—suggests that the similarities these autocracies shared, from their aging leaders and corrupt and ineffectual governments to their educated, unemployed, and disaffected youth, were sufficient to explain the wave of revolutions. Yet the authorities that these young protesters confronted were unique in each nation—as will be the difficulties they face in the future.

Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali—the first Arab dictator to fall to mass protests—initially seemed an unlikely victim. Tunisia has long enjoyed the Arab world's best educational system, largest middle class, and strongest organized labor movement. Yet behind those achievements, Ben Ali's government tightly restricted free expression and political parties. In an almost Orwellian way, he cultivated and manipulated the country's international image as a modern, technocratic regime and a tourist-friendly travel destination.

Beyond the cosmopolitan façade frequented by tourists lay bleak, dusty roads and miserable prospects. It is small wonder that the Islamists' claim that the government was prostituting the country for foreign exchange resonated in Tunisia.

Ben Ali's family was also unusually personalist and predatory in its corruption. As the whistleblower Web site WikiLeaks recently revealed, the U.S. ambassador to Tunisia reported in 2006 that more than half of Tunisia's commercial elites were personally related to Ben Ali through his three adult children, seven siblings, and second wife's ten brothers and sisters. This network became known in Tunisia as "the Family."

That said, although the scale of corruption at the top was breathtaking, Ben Ali's administration did not depend on the kind of accumulation of small bribes that subverted bureaucracies elsewhere, including in Libya and, to a lesser extent, Egypt. This means that Tunisia's government institutions were relatively healthy, raising the prospects for a clean, efficient, and technocratic government to replace Ben Ali.

Tunisia's military also played a less significant role in the country's revolt than the armed forces in the other nations experiencing unrest. Unlike militaries elsewhere in the Arab world, such as Egypt, the Tunisian army has never experienced combat and does not dominate the domestic economy. Under Ben Ali, it existed in the shadow of the country's domestic security services, from which Ben Ali, a former military police officer, hailed. Although its refusal to support Ben Ali's regime contributed to the country's revolution, the military has not participated meaningfully in managing the transition period and is unlikely to shape the ultimate outcome in any significant way.

Since Tunisia's protests initiated the wave of unrest in the Arab world, they were more spontaneous and less well organized than subsequent campaigns in other nations. Yet they demonstrated the power of the country's labor movement, as repeated strikes fueled protests both before Ben Ali fled and as the first short-lived successor government—soon replaced by a second one more amenable to the major unions—attempted to contain the damage to what remained of his regime.

The protests also revealed a sharp generational divide among the opposition. The quick-fire demonstrations filled with angry youth made the generation of regime dissidents from the 1980s, primarily union activists and Islamist militants then led by Rachid al-Ghannouchi, appear elderly and outmoded. Images of an enfeebled Ghannouchi returning to Tunisia after 20 years in exile in the wake of Ben Ali's ouster reflected the radical changes in the agenda of Tunisia's protest movement. Tunisians may once again prove receptive to Ghannouchi's brand of political Islam, but only if his Islamists can capture the imagination of Tunisia's young people, who are principally concerned with receiving what they see as their fair share of the country's wealth and employment opportunities. Tunisia's new leadership must therefore incorporate a generation of young people with only theoretical exposure to freedom of belief, expression, and assembly into a system that fosters open political debate and contestation. And it must respond to some of the demands, especially of the labor movement, that will feature prominently in those debates.

EGYPT'S ARMY MAKES ITS MOVE

In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak's fumbling end epitomized the protracted decline of his

regime's efficacy. The government's deteriorating ability to provide basic services and seeming indifference to widespread unemployment and poverty alienated tens of millions of Egyptians, a feeling that was exacerbated by growing conspicuous consumption among a business elite connected to Mubarak's son Gamal. Yet the army's carefully calibrated intervention in the uprising indicated the continuing power of a military establishment honed by equal parts patronage and patriotism. And the protesters' political and tactical sophistication came about as a result of Mubarak's reluctant but real tolerance of a raucous and unruly press.

As it assumed control of Egypt after Mubarak's downfall, the army revealed its enormous influence in Egyptian society. The military is run by generals who earned their stripes in the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel and who have cooperated closely with the United States since Cairo's 1979 peace treaty with Jerusalem. In contrast to the other Arab militaries that have grappled with unrest this year, the Egyptian army is widely respected by the general populace. It is also deeply interwoven into the domestic economy. As a result, the military leadership remains largely hostile to economic liberalization and private-sector growth, views that carry considerable weight within the provisional government. Thus, as in Tunisia (although for different reasons), the pace of privatization and economic reform will likely be slow, and so the emphasis of reforms will be on democratization.

Repairing decades of public-sector corrosion may also prove problematic. Everything in Egypt—from obtaining a driver's license to getting an education—is formally very cheap but in practice very expensive, since most transactions, official

and unofficial, are accompanied by off-the-books payments. The government pays schoolteachers a pittance, so public education is poor and teachers supplement their salaries by providing private lessons that are essential preparation for school exams. The national police were widely reviled long before their brutal crackdowns at the inception of the January 25 revolt because they represented, in essence, a nationwide protection racket. Ordinary citizens had to bribe police officers all too ready to confiscate licenses and invent violations. The disappearance of the police during the height of the protests—considered by many Egyptians a deliberate attempt to destabilize the country—only deepened that animosity. The process of applying democratic rule of law must begin with the police themselves, meaning that the Interior Ministry will need to reestablish trust between the police and the people.

But the remarkable discipline demonstrated by Egypt's protesters and their subsequent wide-ranging debates about how to reshape their country speak to the unusually high tolerance for free expression in Egypt (by regional standards) prior to the revolution. The campaign to honor Khaled Said, the blogger killed by Egyptian police and whose death initiated the uprising, for example, would have been unimaginable in Tunisia. Egyptians were relatively well prepared to engage in serious and sustained conversations about the composition of their future government, even as they understood that, whatever the outcome, the military would not allow its institutional prerogatives to be substantially eroded.

This latent political wisdom reflects the changes that transformed Egyptian society over the last 15 years, even while the country's aging and ineffectual autocracy remained in place. As Tahrir's protesters were at pains

CHINADAILY
www.chinadailyusa.com

Please call us toll-free at 1-877-263-2459 or email us at readers@chinadailyusa.com

China Daily US Edition is a special customized edition of China's national English-language newspaper.

Launched in 2009 and published Monday through Friday, the US Edition was created to provide readers in the United States and Canada with news about China and the Chinese perspective on trade and international issues.

Published in New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco, Chicago, Los Angeles and Houston, China Daily US Edition is especially tailored to the North American market.

to demonstrate, Egypt has a culture of deep communal bonds and trust, which manifested itself in the demonstrators' incredible discipline: their sustained nonviolence, their refusal to be provoked by thugs and saboteurs, their capacity to police themselves and coordinate their demands, and their ability to organize without any centralized leadership. Perhaps the finest example of this egalitarian spirit was the appearance, in communities rich and poor, of spontaneous citizen mobilizations to maintain order once the police had disengaged. All these developments should give one cause for optimism today about the new Egypt's potential to build and sustain an open society.

THE WRECKAGE OF LIBYA

Whereas demonstrators in Tunis and Cairo successfully ousted their former rulers, Tripoli collapsed into a protracted civil war. Its sustained fighting resulted from Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi's four-decade-long effort to consolidate his power and rule by patronage to kin and clan. Years of artificially induced scarcity in everything from simple consumer goods to basic medical care generated widespread corruption. And the capricious cruelty of Qaddafi's regime produced widespread and deep-seated suspicion. Libyans' trust in their government, and in one another, eroded, and they took refuge in the solace of tribe and family. Libyan society has been fractured, and every national institution, including the military, is divided by the cleavages of kinship and region. As opposed to Tunisia and Egypt, Libya has no system of political alliances, network of economic associations, or national organizations of any kind. Thus, what seemed to begin as nonviolent protests similar to those staged in Tunisia and Egypt soon became an all-out

secession—or multiple separate secessions—from a failed state.

Libya under Qaddafi has borne traces of the Italian fascism that ruled the country in its colonial days: extravagance, dogmatism, and brutality. In the name of his "permanent revolution," Qaddafi also prohibited private ownership and retail trade, banned a free press, and subverted the civil service and the military leadership. In the absence of any public-sector bureaucracy, including a reliable police force, kin networks have provided safety and security as well as access to goods and services. It was along such networks that Libyan society fractured when the regime's capacity to divide and rule began to unravel at the beginning of the protests. Meanwhile, Qaddafi had distributed his armed forces across a deliberately confusing and uncoordinated array of units. Some forces joined the opposition quickly but were prevented from organizing effectively or deploying sophisticated military equipment.

This lack of social and governmental cohesion will hamper any prospective transition to democracy. Libya must first restore security and introduce the law and order missing for decades under Qaddafi's regime. As daunting as that task may seem, further difficulties lie on the horizon: reviving trust across clans and provinces; reconstructing public administration; strengthening civil society through political parties, open media, and nongovernmental organizations. Libya's decades of international isolation have left the generation in its 30s and 40s—the one likely to assume leadership in a new Libya—poorly educated and ill equipped to manage the country. Others have been co-opted by the regime and stand to lose should Qaddafi fall. The challenge for Libya is both simpler and

Demystifying the Arab Spring

more vexing than those facing Tunisia and Egypt: Libya confronts the complexity not of democratization but of state formation. It will need to construct a coherent national identity and public administration out of Qaddafi's shambles.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

The young activists in each country have been sharing ideas, tactics, and moral support, but they are confronting different opponents and operating within different contexts. The critical distinctions between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya will shape the outcomes of their respective movements. While Tunisia and Egypt grapple in their own ways with building political institutions—constitutions, political parties, and electoral systems—Libya will need to begin by constructing the rudiments of a civil society. While Egypt struggles with the long shadow of military rule, Tunisia and Libya will need to redefine the relationship between their privileged capital cities and their sullen hinterlands. Tempting as it is to treat the Arab uprisings as a single movement, their causes and future missions demonstrate the many variations between them.

These distinctions will matter for the United States and its allies. In June 2009, little more than 90 years after Woodrow Wilson's ringing endorsement of self-determination, U.S. President Barack Obama invigorated the Muslim world with his historic speech in Cairo. There, he declared that he has

an unyielding belief that all people yearn for certain things: the ability to speak your mind and have a say in how you are governed; confidence in the rule of law and the equal administration of justice; government that is transparent

and doesn't steal from the people; the freedom to live as you choose. These are not just American ideas; they are human rights. And that is why we will support them everywhere.

His proclamation did not produce this year's democratic upheavals in the Arab world, but it set expectations for how the United States would respond to them. If Washington hopes to fulfill its promise to support these rights, it will need to acquire a nuanced understanding of the historic circumstances of the uprisings. The Obama administration must encourage and rein in various constituencies and institutions in each country, from championing the labor movement in Tunisia to curtailing the military in Egypt. In each case, the United States cannot pursue the goals so eloquently identified by Obama without discarding the notion of a singular Arab revolt and grappling with the conditions of the countries themselves. 🌐