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The Arab Revolt: Roots and Perspectives

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Key Points

- The wave of Arab revolt, which started in Tunisia and then Egypt and Libya, is spreading at an unprecedented speed. This is the result of not only modern internet-based technologies of communication, but also the deep socio-economic crisis of the region coupled with autocratic regimes that are not qualified to address the needs of the new generation.
- The socio-economic malaise in the region is deep. Youth unemployment, degradation of natural resources, and demographic explosion are among the driving forces. Corruption and economic autocracy went hand in hand. There is a need for a complete socio-economic overhaul. Toppling autocracies is a necessary first step, but the success of the current will also depend on the possible creation of new political institutions, and a reformist agenda.
- It is curious to see the different reaction of the West compared to the wave of the Color Revolutions a decade earlier. Western leaders, who closely collaborated with the autocratic regimes for decades, and did not come to the support of pro-democracy militants, need to revise their approach. They should also revise their policies towards the national questions of the region, including the situations in Palestine and Iraq. Lastly, for a stable Middle East and North Africa, the West, and especially Europe, needs to revise the position of the region on the global economic map, as oil-based economies of the region have failed to create the necessary jobs and sustainable development.

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The Arab revolt that started in Tunisia and overthrew the reign of Zein El-Abedeem Ben Ali is taking the form of a huge wave. The regime of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, the central state of the Arab World, followed suit. Uprising in Libya continues, in spite of attempts by the Kaddhafi regime to kill it in blood and fire. Ali Abdallah Saleh of Yemen declared that he will not seek a new mandate, a concession which only emboldened both opposition and youth revolt. King Abdallah of Jordan sacked the unpopular government of Samir Rifai, and named Maruf Bakhit as the new prime minister and asked him to bring "true political reforms". In a word, the entire Arab World is facing an unprecedented wave of revolt.

The contestation has already scored a number of victories: the 23 year-old autocrat of Tunisia promptly left the country to exile in Saudi Arabia; in Egypt, Hosni Mubarak abandoned long brewing plans to install his son Jamal in his seat, and was forced to abdicate, handing power over to the military, after trying to bring his loyal chief of the *mukhabarat*, or the secret services, Omar Suleiman, to the post of vice president.

In case there is doubt about the importance of the on-going Arab revolt, an animated debate has emerged about its nature, and growing, sometimes anxious prognostics about its possible outcome. On the one hand we have ardent embrace of yet another "Twitter" or "Facebook" revolution, while others underline the power of the internet and the satellite televisions in undermining autocratic regimes. Such comparisons, consciously or not, create an emotional field where the demonstrators or rebels are like "us", our Western, modern, middle-class, globalised "youth". Comparisons of the fall of the Berlin Wall and the liberation of Eastern Europe with the current wave of Arab revolt are abundant. Is this "The Arab world's 1989 Revolution?" asks al-Jazeera, while the *Deutsche-Welle* finds similarities with the events in East Germany over two decades back?¹ Lesser enthusiasts fear the current popular mobilization will topple pro-Western regimes, break the regional power balance in a way unfavorable to Israel, and eventually open up the political space for Islamist forces, be it the Muslim Brotherhood or more radical jihadi groups.

Socio-Economic Malaise

The current revolt in Arab countries is deep-rooted, and surpasses simply rebelling against political authoritarianism to aim at the heart of the socio-economic structure of the region.² The Arab countries are some of the most exposed to rising food prices, since the region is one of the driest in the world, flanked by the two greatest deserts on the globe: the Sahara and Rub' al-Khali. According to a World

Bank study, the region imports half of its food, and spends the equivalent of 30 billion USD on food imports. With the on-going population explosion – the region's population is growing at a rhythm of 2.3% a year – and decrease in water availability as a result of climate change and increased damming of rivers, the region will increasingly depend on food imports, and therefore be exposed to international market fluctuations. The situation of the industrial sector is not better: the Arab Human Development Report in 2009 notes that the domination of economies by oil has led to the weakening of other sectors: "the Arab countries were less industrialized in 2007 than in 1970, almost four decades previously."³ Lastly, the global crisis of 2008 had a deep impact on the Arab financial sector. According to one estimate, Arab countries lost 2.5 trillion dollars as a result of the global financial meltdown.⁴

The social consequences of those structural problems are deep: The existing political orders today are too rigid, autocratic, corrupt, and militaristic, which does not qualify them to address mounting socio-economic problems. One of the most explosive issues is youth unemployment: Arab Development Report estimates that within a decade Arab countries need to create 51 million new positions to accommodate young people seeking jobs.

The current socio-economic problems are not unique, but repetitions of periodic failings of regional economies. The regional economic model, highly resembling colonial era mono-export and dependent economies, has failed. Today, not only the oil-rich countries like Algeria or Saudi Arabia are dependent on petrodollars, but the entire region is through labor migration, remittances and direct investments from oil-rich economies. The most evident failures are Algeria and Libya, which are in deep social and political crisis in spite of rich oil deposits.

What is really peculiar is that the current revolt is taking place when oil prices are relatively high, unlike the "bread riots" of the 1980's, a result of a collapse of international oil prices. This is a clear sign that the oil-based economic model is a failure, and a source of regional instability. The best example of this failure is Algeria, where oil-richness, corruption, military dictatorship and social problems coexist under one roof.

Trigger

This wave of revolt started on a background of deteriorating social conditions: the rising prices of food and basic services. This is not a surprise as global food prices are record high, and in Arab countries two-fifth of income is spent on food (see Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of household expenditure on food from total budget

Saudi Arabia	23.8%
Tunisia	35.8%
Egypt	38.8%
Jordan	40.9%
Algeria	43.9%
Switzerland	10.3%
Greece	14.5%
Turkey	24.8%

See Economic Research Service, USDA, 2007:
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/cpifoodandexpenditures/data/2007table97.htm>

Widespread unemployment crossed with the rise of basic food prices made the situation untenable. Protests against social conditions clashed with the rigid systems of autocratic rule which do not allow not only mass protest but political action in general. The other important element to the start of the rebellion is complete hopelessness: the symbolic act of 26-year old Mohamed Boazizi, the university educated but unemployed vegetable seller in Tunisia, whose self-immolation ignited the fire of the Tunisian revolution. It is incredible the speed at which the fire in Tunisian provinces spread all around the Arab World. Attempts at self-immolation were repeated in several countries: Algeria, Egypt, Mauritania, Yemen, and even Saudi Arabia.

A number of analysts who see, especially in Tunisia, a "Middle class revolution" on the background of economic development, where developing social forces overthrow an obsolete political system, are off the mark.⁵ Although Tunisia does better in comparison with neighboring countries, it was doing worse in comparison with its own past: social and economic conditions were in decline for the last decade, and in the last three to four years a large number of protests were indicators of this. The new Tunisian Minister of Economic Reform was quoted saying "among the 500,000 or so unemployed were 130,000 graduates"⁶ – in a total labor force of 3.8 million. When one looks at the socio-economic conditions in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan or Yemen, the situation is even worse than in Tunisia. On day 16 of Egyptian anti-Mubarak protest, labor unions declared strikes and expressed their support to the demonstrations, from employees of Suez Canal to public transportation workers in the capital. And on day 18 Mubarak resigned, handing power over to the military. If we learned something from the Color Revolutions, especially from Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, it is that the simple rotation of different fractions of the ruling elites is not in itself enough to bring reforms to the political system, or to curb corruption. In Egypt, we did not yet have that

kind of rotation, but the simple disappearance of an aging dictator for the benefit of the army, which was never far away from the centre of power.

What is happening in Egypt, Tunisia and beyond is not simply a young, modern middle-class rebellion against authoritarian rule anachronistic with recent economic developments and social stratification. It is rather social malaise that goes beyond the middle classes to touch workers, the unemployed and agriculture laborers. This far the popular movements have not brought about new political institutions, or pushed hard enough to reform old ones. Yet, it is not clear whether we will be witnessing a regime change, or whether the ruling circles will be back to business once the wave of mobilization dies down.

Leadership

The on-going Arab revolt seems to be leaderless. The first reaction by the local regimes, dissidents, and Western observers alike is that of surprise. No one saw this coming. It was hopelessness that ignited the popular revolt, not organized and concerted political action, symbolized by the series of self immolation starting with the desperate act of Mohammad Bouazizi in the Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid in December 2010. The Arab youth have initiated and led many of the political actions without the leadership or even the intervention of the traditional opposition forces.⁷ Near Tahrir Square in Cairo, young activists improvised an operations center in an abandoned touristic company, where they "receive journalists and give orders to the youth in the field."⁸ While it is the computer savvy youth who gave new life to dissent that was bubbling in Egypt for several years, it is the older generation of political figures who are negotiating with members of the Mubarak regime about a solution and transition towards democracy. In Libya, demonstrations "exploded" two days earlier than the "day of anger" announced by opposition parties. This "spontaneous" uprising resembles both the Palestinian Intifada of 1987 – which was the result of hopelessness – as well as the hunger riots of the late 1980's in a number of Arab countries. It can be contrasted with the Color Revolution which was led by part of the elite in power; many of the leaders of the Color Revolutions occupied high functions shortly before the revolutions: Saakashvili was a former Justice Minister of Georgia, Yushenko and Bakiyev were former prime ministers respectively of Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

The leadership vacuum will not take long to fill up. It will largely depend on the nature of the political struggle inside each country: will the aging rulers give up power and a new mechanism for democratic consultations created? Or, will there be massive use of force and violence, leading to bloodshed and radi-

calizing opposition forces? It will also depend on the balance of international forces, and whether the West will come to support Arab democratic forces, or just abandon them.

What is happening today is similar to the mass riots that shook a number of Arab countries in the 1980's: it started from economic problems caused by food price rises and transformed into political contestation. In this sense, it differs from the Color Revolutions which were essentially political revolutions triggered by electoral fraud, and did not change the course of liberal, pro-market reforms that were initiated by the previous generation of rulers, but only accelerated them as was the case in Georgia.

The National Question

The Arab revolt will cast the national question once again on the agenda. We have already seen with the previous wave of Color Revolutions how unsolved national issue can present an obstacle for political reforms: Kosovo has presented a serious obstacle for Serbian efforts in rapprochement with the European Union, while the unresolved conflicts of Abkhazia and South Ossetia triggered several armed confrontations, culminating with the five-day's war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008.

4 Similarly, the central national question of the Arab World is the unresolved issue of Palestine. While watching the televised coverage of Tahrir Square on al-Jazeera in Arabic, it was surprising to see how often anti-governmental slogans reflected the national question: "Go away, Mubarak, the agent of the Americans", or "Mubarak, the agent of Camp David", and how the slogan "The people want to change the regime" became "the people want to liberate Palestine". Mubarak's long cooperation with Israel and the US, against his own public opinion, by cooperating on the siege of Gaza was a major drawback on his legitimacy.

It is also remarkable how regimes can acquire symbolic legitimacy by casting themselves on the side of "resistance", as is the case with the Syrian authorities. In various chats and discussion groups there are voices defending the regime of Bashar al-Asad, saying that he has supported anti-Israeli resistance (in Lebanon with Hezbollah for example), or anti-American resistance in Iraq. For how long will such symbolic capital help the Ba'athist regime in Syria – which in nature is not very different from that in Libya – while socio-economic conditions are deteriorating, and while the regime does not tolerate even the slightest expression of dissenting perspective?

Repression and the Army

Both in Egypt and Tunisia, the primary instrument of repression of popular protest was the police. Yet, when the popular protests got bigger and the police were overwhelmed, the Tunisian army was deployed but refused to open fire on the people. The Tunisian army's position forced precipitously Ben Ali to escape and seek safe haven abroad. In Egypt, too, the primary instrument of repression was the police, and, like in Tunisia, when the protests became too big, the police were overwhelmed, taken out of the streets and the army was deployed in their place.

Yet, the Egyptian army is of a different gist compared to the Tunisian one: in Tunisia the state relied on the police – Ben Ali being himself a former police officer – while in Egypt the army is in power. The last three Egyptian heads of state originated from the army and the "free officers" movement: Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar al-Sadat, and the most current ruler Hosni Mubarak. High officers have important privileges and enjoy much influence in various economic sectors. With the emergence of the Egyptian revolt, Mubarak has tried to bring the army into the forefront of his exercise of power. The newly appointed vice-president Omar Suleiman openly threatened a "military coup" in case the opposition pushed its demands of regime change, rather than being content with cosmetic reforms. But the army is one of the obstacles in front of modernization in Egypt. The army is susceptible to internal divisions against mounting popular discontent, and especially divisions between its leadership and the rank-and-file, with their modest social origins and sympathy to the cause of the dissenting popular movement.

Here, a comparison with the events in 1989 on the one hand, and the Color Revolutions on the other, is interesting. The bread riots of Algeria in 1989 led eventually to the opening up of the political space and the first free elections in 1992. When the authorities saw that they were losing to the Islamic Salvation Front, the army intervened to cancel the elections, provoking a bloody civil war that stretched over a decade and caused over one hundred thousand victims. The West by and large supported the army's intervention into politics, and its cancellation of the elections, fearing an Islamist victory. On the other hand, Western powers were firm in their rejection of the usage of armed forces in repressing the opposition in the case of the Color Revolutions. Western powers did not need to threaten with military reprisal; it was enough to inform the corrupt leaders and oligarchs of East European countries that in the case of bloodshed, their bank accounts in the West could be frozen.

The West

Western political leaders have remained perplexed, to put it mildly, in front of the popular revolutions in North Africa, and the spread of popular mobilization elsewhere in the Middle East. The first reaction in Brussels, Paris or Washington was the fear of losing a long standing and reliable partner in Ben Ali, Mubarak, and in some cases even with the Colonel Kadhafi. The other preoccupation of Western leaders has been to avoid a bloodbath as the popular movement spreads to proportions not seen in decades, and where the old repressive policies are not enough to contain dissent. But unlike during the popular, pro-democratic revolutions in Eastern Europe, the West did not clearly articulate support to the legitimacy of the popular movements.

And for cause: the US administration developed over the last three decades very close military, political and economic cooperation with regimes like that of Hosni Mubarak. In the wake of 9/11, the US administration developed close security cooperation, including illegal kidnappings and torture, with the Egyptian secret services then headed by Omar Suleiman, the current acting president.⁹ If anything, European politicians were in a worse position to support democratic movements in North Africa. Former French Foreign Minister Michèle Alliot-Marie vacationed in Tunisia and enjoyed the hospitality of a Tunisian businessman close to the Ben Ali's family, including the usage of his private jet for personal reasons, weeks before his downfall;¹⁰ during the same vacation period the French Prime Minister François Fillon in his turn benefited from the largesse of the Egyptian president, enjoying free holidays on The Nile. The former colonial power which exerts much influence over North Africa and the Middle East not only could not support the popular movements, nor see them coming; its key policy makers were personally indebted to the old dictators and are passing their energy to justify their wrong acts.¹¹

But Western responsibility is deeper than security cooperation with the police states of Ben Ali, Mubarak, and the others in the region. We have learned that Mubarak has a net worth of 40 to 70 billion USD.¹² This colossal amount was accumulated illegally, and although it is good news that Switzerland and the EU are trying to block Mubarak family accounts, the question remains whether Western leaders are serious in combating such massive corruption. European countries should do more to establish much needed social justice among its southern borders, help these countries in developing their economies and create the much needed jobs for the youth. The EU imposed liberal economic policies did not help in job creation in North Africa; on the contrary, it destroyed numerous small and mid-sized enterprises unable

to compete with European counterparts.¹³ The oil-dependent economies of the region failed to bring development, modern governance, or even stability. The current wave of protest is a clear sign that the region needs to move beyond its oil dependency if it wants to provide a future to its youth. Here too Europe has a role to play and a responsibility to assume.

What Next?

How far and how deep will the North African revolt spread is still to be seen. Yet, the future stability of the region will depend on the kind of reformist energy policy and political institutions the current popular mobilization will bring about. If it fails, then we will once again have the necessary conditions for the emergence of radical, nihilist political movements; whether these movements have Islamist outer crest or not is not all that important. But today, at the dawn of a new and unprecedented popular mobilization all across the Arab World, the time should be for optimism, and it is the task of Europe not to doubt the final result of the political changes taking place, but to understand the depth of changes and try and help the Arab youth to succeed in their transition to achieve democratic political institutions necessary for deeper social and economic reforms.

NB: The views expressed in this paper are entirely and solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the GCSP.

Endnotes

- 1 See *Al-Jazeera* English service, February 2, 2011: <http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2011/02/201121165427186924.html> and *Deutsche Welle*, February 4, 2011: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,14817149,00.html>
- 2 See Vicken Cheterian, "The Arab crisis: food, water, energy, justice", *Open Democracy*, January 26, 2011: www.opendemocracy.net/vicken-cheterian/arab-crisis-food-energy-water-justice
- 3 *Arab Human Development Report*, United Nations Development Programme, 2009, p. 10.
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- 13 See the interview of *Qantara* with Werner Ruf: http://en.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-476/_nr-1444/i.html

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