



DO THE POST-COMMUNIST TRANSITIONS OFFER LESSONS FOR THE ARAB WORLD?

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When the Arab uprisings were just beginning in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011, few “experts” on the Middle East predicted the speed and extent of their spread. Still fewer analysts made analogies to the post-communist revolutions of 1989-91. More recently, however, as tremors have shaken most of the region, that comparison has come into vogue. President Obama pointed up the analogy during his May 28 visit to Warsaw, and numerous policy analysts and commentators have echoed a similar theme.

Such comparisons to the post-communist transitions are indeed useful in dispelling the facile assertion that “Arabs are incapable of democracy” or that “this region is unique.” While there are very significant differences between the Arab region and the Eastern Europe/Eurasia of 1989, there are also many striking similarities between their respective revolts.

History makes clear that it is too early to predict whether the current uprisings in North Africa and the Middle East will become full-fledged revolutions resembling those of post-communist Europe/Eurasia—even though that is precisely what most of the protesters in the region are calling for. (For a useful perspective on how rare it is for full-fledged revolutions to succeed, see “Understanding the Revolutions of 2011 by Jack A. Goldstone in *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2011.) Nevertheless, given the striking parallels in the early stages of these two region-wide movements, comparisons with the post-communist transitions should be thoroughly explored. This essay represents an initial consideration of those parallels and of their potential implications.

STRIKING SIMILARITIES

Notwithstanding the obvious differences between the two regions, there are at least 12 important similarities between the Arab uprisings of 2011 and the revolts of 1989-91 that so profoundly transformed the communist Europe/Eurasia.

In both regions, the existing regimes that were the object of revolts were typified by *multiple decades of strongly authoritarian rule*. Governments in both regions had developed a virtual monopoly of power, highly repressive techniques of control, and a self-perpetuating—and blatantly privileged—inner circle surrounding the top leader and his family or closest associates. Although the communist regimes had instituted a greater degree of totalitarianism than have the Arab autocracies, the latter have taken many key pages from the same book and developed rather advanced systems of control.

Similarly, by the time of the revolts there was *widespread disillusionment or cynicism* about official regime ideologies and programs of government. In most cases, government institutions had become highly corrupt, were failing to provide adequate public services, and often abused and humiliated citizens. The hypocrisy of the rulers was increasingly transparent, and the affronts to human dignity became too much to bear.

In terms of material and social well-being, both the pre-1989 communist governments and the Arab autocracies had state-dominated economies that *failed to provide the quality of life aspired to* by a majority of their citizens. For the communist countries, and for the non-oil-rich Arab countries, *economic performance visibly lagged* relative to those economies with which the population tended to make comparisons. The example of East Germans looking invidiously across the Iron Curtain to the Federal Republic of Germany comes immediately to mind. Analogously, Egyptians and Syrians have long seen greater

prosperity and freedom in nearby Europe and Turkey than at home, as have the Tunisians and other North Africans when they look northward across the Mediterranean. Although unemployment *per se* was not a problem in the communist economies, there remains considerable analogy in that truly productive employment leading to the production and availability of attractive goods and services was scarce in both regions.

In both regions, there was also a *growing, educated middle class* for whom their state-dominated economy was *failing to generate commensurate job opportunities* or adequate material rewards even for those who did have work. And, as a result of increased travel and access to electronic media, these educated younger generations gained *increased exposure to the West*, with its greater freedoms and prosperity.

Both sets of autocracies regularly ran *elections that were neither free nor fair*. While the communist regimes were more blatant in eliminating virtually all opposition, most of the Arab autocrats have permitted only token opposition and created an electoral playing field almost as blatantly tilted as the communist systems. Furthermore, in both regions succession planning and recruitment for top leadership positions was generally either opaque or visibly nepotistic rather than being based on merit or on public preferences.

Another important similarity: in both regions the uprisings started with *spontaneous and peaceful popular protests* characterized by the absence of widely recognized opposition leaders or organized political movements or parties. There was also little or no organized civil society, and what non-government groups did exist worked largely underground and used non-traditional means of communication. As with the post-communist revolutions, what is being demonstrated in the Arab world today is what Czech playwright/president Vaclav Havel called “the power of the powerless.” The impact of this popular power has been accelerated by the speed of contemporary social media, but the kind of networking that created the Prague’s Velvet Revolution and later revolutions in Belgrade, Tbilisi and Kiev was similar in its essentials to what brought so many young Egyptians together so forcefully in Tahrir Square.

In the post-communist revolutions, just as in the recent Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan and Yemeni uprisings, *internal security and military forces proved non-monolithic*, with significant numbers of officers and troops reluctant to fire on their own citizens. One obvious explanation of this unwillingness to shoot was the massive and peaceful mobilization of so many citizens, such that soldiers would inevitably have ended up killing kinsmen or neighbors. It is too soon to tell whether this phenomenon will hold for Syria or certain other Arab states, although the Arab monarchies so far seem better able than the region’s republican dictatorships to retain control of their security forces—and perhaps of their subjects.

A further important similarity in the transition dynamics of these two regions is the *unwillingness or inability of major external powers to intervene forcefully* to preserve the status quo. Mikhail Gorbachev’s decision not to intervene militarily in the Warsaw Pact countries was a critical factor in enabling the Eastern European revolutions to succeed. Conversely, the absence of U.S. and European support for Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Hosni Mubarak, Muammar Qaddafi and Ali Abdullah Saleh helped to speed their demise. In the case of the Arab uprisings, however, certain regional powers *have* been willing to intervene. Saudi troops in Bahrain dampened prospects for major change there, and Iran has escalated its support to the Assad regime in Syria.

In addition to the eleven points of similarity mentioned above there is, not surprisingly, a twelfth commonality: a strong “*democratic contagion*” effect. The early uprisings in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia spread quickly throughout Central Europe and then, more slowly, to the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia. Similarly, once the initial sparks were struck in Tunisia and Egypt, Arab democratic movements quickly multiplied and spread from one country to another—helped by geographic proximity, a common language, regional media, and a sense of shared Arab identity. “If they can do it, we can do it.”

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

There are, of course, also many obvious differences between the current Arab world and the communist Europe/Eurasia of two decades ago. The following seem most salient:

Historic experience. Prior to the uprisings of 1989-91, most of the communist regimes of Europe/Eurasia had experienced the same ideology and highly similar forms of government for at least 40 years and, in most of the USSR, for 70 years. Although many of the Arab regimes have similar longevity, they vary sharply in their official ideologies and internal organization, ranging from long-established monarchies, to theocracies, to military-based dictatorships. Some Arab countries have relatively well-developed government institutions, whereas others have highly personalized one-man rule as in the cases of Qaddafi and Saleh. Ideologically, these countries run the gamut from Baathist secularism to Wahabi Islam and other forms of Sunni, Shiite and Sufi religious doctrine, combined with some vestiges of Arab nationalism, Nasserite statism, and “Third World-ism.”

Regional relationships. Whereas the European and Eurasian communist countries formed a single geopolitical bloc dominated by Moscow (with the exceptions of Yugoslavia and Albania), today’s Arab countries have had only the weakest of

supranational ties through the Arab League. In contrast with the bipolar competition between Moscow and Washington that had characterized Europe and Eurasia until 1991, the Middle East and North Africa have experienced a greater variety of competing sources of power and influence. Although Moscow has played a much lessened role since the demise of the USSR, the United States and the EU countries continue to exercise significant influence from outside the region. In addition, there are also important mid-level powers attempting to exercise influence from within the region, most notably Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey.

Furthermore, individual Arab countries have widely varying alliances and affinities with powers outside the region (for example, Egypt-U.S., Tunisia-France, Syria-Iran). And these rival power-brokers link into and attempt to exploit the various competing ideologies and theologies—most notably the Sunni-Shiite schism and the divides between fundamentalism, religious moderation and secularism. A further complicating factor is the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, whose dynamics have had a powerful impact both within the region and with respect to the policies of the U.S. and other external players.

Alternative role models. The early reformers in post-communist Europe had attractive European democratic role models that they could point to right at their Western doorstep. In contrast, the Arab countries have no *Arab* role models for democracy—although Turkey does provide a good nearby example of an Islamic democracy with a successful market economy (though, admittedly, recent developments in Turkey, including the arrests of journalists and military officers, give cause for concern about its democratic future). However, Iran right next door aggressively promotes a very different model—an authoritarian theocratic state that uses varying combinations of fundamentalism, Shiism and anti-Israel tactics to advance its agenda.

Poles of attraction/external assistance. In the case of the early revolts in Eastern Europe, NATO and the European Union beckoned invitingly, with both organizations at the time open to eastward expansion. Thus, the westernmost post-communist countries were quickly wooed into a ready-made “democratic club”—a system of alliances and economic affiliations that was a very attractive alternative to the Warsaw Pact and COMECON. Furthermore, gaining membership in this club involved strong conditionality, thus requiring the deep and difficult political and economic reforms required to create sustainable democracies.

In addition to the attractions of these “clubs,” the United States, the EU and other democratic allies made available generous financial and technical assistance over long periods, in some cases stretching beyond two decades, in order to encourage and facilitate the post-communist transitions. This, along with the attraction of joining a successful club right next door, made the domestic political task of reform-minded leaders substantially easier when it came to enacting reforms that were unpopular politically.

In contrast, for the Arab countries of today there is no democratic club available to join in any foreseeable future even if these countries meet the most rigorous pre-conditions. And it is not clear to what extent Arab reform leaders can count on the West to provide them with prolonged financial and political support that was so helpful in encouraging and accelerating Eastern Europe’s political and economic reforms.

Moreover, Eastern Europe had no precise counterpart to the forces represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, which in the Middle East is both anti-regime and, arguably, anti-liberal.

ANALOGIES AND RELEVANT LESSONS

Given these important differences, along with the many similarities noted earlier, what useful perspectives can the post-communist transitions provide for the current Arab uprisings?

First, it seems likely that there will be an even wider dispersion of outcomes than what we have seen so far in the post-communist world. The two decades elapsed, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, have led to remarkably disparate results—despite the many similarities mentioned above, and the strong democratization momentum that seemed to prevail in the early 1990s.

The nine communist countries that existed in 1989 have now become 29 independent states. Eight of these countries, including Poland, the Czech and Slovak Republics, Slovenia and the Baltic countries have become well-consolidated democracies and prosperous market economies. However, another nine post-communist countries (on average, larger in size and population than the eight democracies) are currently at the opposite end of the political spectrum. Countries like Belarus, Kazakhstan and, most notably, Russia have either reverted to or never ceased to be hard-core autocracies. The remaining twelve post-communist countries currently fall at various points along the political spectrum, ranging from emerging democracies like Romania and Croatia to “hybrid” regimes such as Georgia, Bosnia, Moldova and Ukraine. (These assessments of democratization levels are based on the thorough annual assessments provided by Freedom House, most recently in its Nations in Transit 2010.)

Why such a wide variety of outcomes after such seemingly similar beginnings? Based on the extensive scholarship now

available on this 20-year experiment in post-communist transition, here are some of the main factors that explain the success stories of post-communist democratization:

1. Extensive exposure to Western democratic societies
2. Prior direct experience with democracy or, at least, with partial freedoms
3. Vestigial “civil society” institutions or other forms of pluralism
4. Development of underground opposition movements
5. Absence of ethnic or religious conflicts
6. A substantial middle class
7. High educational levels
8. A fair and transparent approach to privatization
9. Leaders of high caliber in the early or intermediate stages of transition
10. History of prior existence as a state or a strong sense of national identity

Conversely, factors such as the lack of prior experience with pluralism, lesser Western exposure, and lower educational and economic development levels help to explain continued autocracy or failed efforts at democratization, most notably in several of the post-Soviet republics. And, where civil wars and even less violent forms of inter-communal conflict have occurred, these have also retarded democratization.

The so-called “oil curse” seen in the post-communist world may well also apply to certain Arab countries. Russia’s authoritarian regression under Vladimir Putin and autocratic consolidation in countries like Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan demonstrate how an abundance of oil and gas easily controlled by the state can be used to buy the population’s acquiescence and the loyalty of the security forces—while still satisfying the greed of the rulers and their inner circle. The analogy to Saudi Arabia and other oil-rich Arab states is striking.

Given the much greater variation among regime types, economic and social development levels and other differences among the Arab countries, the dispersion of outcomes in the Middle East and North Africa will no doubt equal and perhaps exceed that of the post-communist region.

A second conclusion from these cross-regional comparisons is that, even for those Arab countries that do make a successful transition to democracy, this result is likely to take a long time to consolidate. In Eastern Europe, it took at least a decade and in most cases considerably longer to produce consolidated democracies. Since there are only a few Arab countries in which conditions seem as propitious as they were in Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia in 1989, it is reasonable to expect the emergence of full-fledged, stable democracies to take at least a generation. Continuing the analogy, even in the most successful cases, for each two steps forward there may be one step backward—and presumably even more halting progress in some of the less propitious cases.

A third conclusion is that, external political support and technical assistance can be extremely helpful for democratic transitions, even though this is by no means sufficient, nor even the primary factor in determining success. However, when other major factors for success are present, such the decay of the old regime, strong internal demand for reform, and early reform leadership of reasonable quality, then prolonged, high-quality external support can make an important difference.

A fourth conclusion from the post-communist comparison is that it is hard to predict winner and losers at this early stage. Based on the indicators of democratic potential discussed above, Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt would seem to be among the countries with the highest potential for a successful democratic transition, just as Poland, Hungary or Czechoslovakia seemed the most promising in 1989. However, Slovakia regressed for several years after it split from the Czech Republic. Also, after the fall of the Berlin Wall but before the implosion of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, few foresaw that Estonia and Slovenia would be near the head of the democratization pack only a decade later. Nor, in 1997, was it at all clear that Russia would regress as much as it has from its Boris Yeltsin-era reforms.

On the negative end of the spectrum, Yemen looks particularly unpromising because of its tribalism, low education levels, severe economic problems, and lack of solid institutions of government—now compounded by increasing levels of violence. And one could argue that Saudi Arabia, because of the survival skills of its hereditary ruling class, its vast oil riches, and its well-developed security services and social welfare system is likely to evolve slowly at best and to continue discouraging democratic reforms in its “Near Abroad.”

Such projections are tantalizing, and they may be useful for tactical policymaking in the short term. However, for the longer term, one must be prepared for a wide variety of potential outcomes given the large number of factors that can affect a democratic transition's success or failure—including the difference that a single individual leader can make at a key moment of inflection.

The next few years are likely to be challenging and hard to predict, although potentially very fruitful in terms of U.S. relations with the Arab world.

Those who wish to see democracy succeed in the region would do well to review carefully the lessons of history, to keep an open mind and a close watch on developments, and to remain nimble in the short term while keeping a determined focus on strategy for the long term.

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