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Middle East in 2013: Promise and (Lots of) Peril

Summary

- The Middle East faces even bigger challenges in 2013 than it did during the first two years of the so-called Arab Spring. So far—a pivotal caveat—the Arab uprisings have deepened the political divide, worsened economic woes and produced greater insecurity. Solutions are not imminent either.
- More than 120 million people in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen have experienced successful uprisings that ousted four leaders who together ruled a total of 129 years. But more than half of the Arab world's 350 million people have yet to witness any real change at all.
- Defining a new order has proven far harder than ousting old autocrats. Phase one was creating conditions for democracy. Phase two is a kind of democratic chaos as dozens of parties in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia do political battle (and in some cases physical battle) over constitutions.
- *Ancien regimes* have not totally given up, as in Yemen. The cost of change has exceeded even the highest estimates, as in Syria. So most Arabs are probably disappointed with the “Arab Spring” for one of many reasons.
- Nevertheless the uprisings were never going to happen in one season. This is instead only the beginning of a decades-long process—as most in the West should know from their own experiences.

“[R]evolutions are never fairy tales. Nor do they create utopias, either instant or long term.”

Background

The Arab world faces tumultuous challenges two years after the first uprising was sparked by Tunisian street vendor Mohammed Bouazizi, who set himself on fire on Dec. 17, 2010 to protest government corruption and abuse. But the four countries in transition—Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen—face different political, economic and security hurdles. The uprisings have so far produced mixed results.

On the second anniversary, Egypt is consumed with a political crisis over a new constitution and a deepening divide between Islamists and secularists. Tunisians confront historic unemployment rates and labor tensions. Libya is struggling to reign in hundreds of militias and to reconcile tensions between its eastern and western regions that threaten to tear the country apart. Yemen is absorbed with launching a reconciliation dialogue before it can craft a new constitution or hold parliamentary elections.

Several other Arab countries have witnessed protests since late 2010. Virtually no country is today immune from budding or burgeoning opposition forces bidding to open up political systems, whether in sheikhdoms or socialist states. In Bahrain, sporadic protests continue to demand the ouster of a royal prime minister in power more than 40 years. Syria's bloody uprising against President Bashar Assad, which has claimed an estimated 40,000 lives, has been the most traumatic—and will continue into 2013. Even after a denouement for the Assad dynasty, sectarian rivalries could continue to destabilize efforts to create a new government in Damascus.

But revolutions are never fairy tales. Nor do they create utopias, either instant or long term. The Tunisian street vendors who now work on the same corner where Bouazizi sold oranges summed it up pretty well in 2012: "We have more freedoms," one said, "but we have fewer jobs." The following is a rundown of political transitions in four countries—in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen.

Egypt

In 2013, Egypt faces what may be the most contentious elections since the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak. It will basically be a political re-do for a new parliament. But it also reflects the new political divide across the region. The poll will pit rising Islamist parties against the increasingly embittered young and secular parties that launched the uprising in the Arab world's most populous state—but who now feel marginalized or excluded.

Egypt's transition was especially rocky in 2012, after phased parliamentary elections concluded in January and a presidential election in June. Islamists dominated the emerging political scene, with two parties winning more than 70 percent in Egypt's lower house of parliament and a Muslim Brotherhood candidate winning the presidency.

Egypt's new government took surprisingly bold moves in both domestic and foreign policy. President Mohamed Morsi, a U.S.-educated engineer, pushed the military back into its barracks when he fired the top two senior military chiefs in August 2012. He also demonstrated loyalty to the Camp David peace accords with Israel, working with the United States to establish a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in November. And he defied right-wing Salafis—his Islamist flank—about foreign aid from the International Monetary Fund to jumpstart the economy, ignoring their claims that paying interest on loans was usury and forbidden under Islam.

But Egypt became more unstable in 2012 as it tried to craft a new order in a new constitution, which only widened already deep fissures between secular and Islamist activists. The key issue centered on the role of Islam in the new political system, but the mere process of trying to write a constitution also became part of the controversy.

Egyptian courts dissolved the first constituent assembly in April and then the newly elected parliament (through which constituent assemblies are formed) in June. In November, Morsi seized wider power preventing the courts from overruling his actions, claiming he wanted to prevent the courts from disbanding the second assembly tasked to write a constitution.

The power play sparked the most violent unrest nationwide since the ouster of Mubarak in early 2011. Tens of thousands rallied both for and against the constitution in the run-up to the referendum in December. More than 30 opposition groups joined forces in the National Salvation Front, a coalition headed by former Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohamed ElBaradei, to demand that the vote be deferred, the draft constitution withdrawn and a new constituent assembly formed.

Morsi called for dialogue, but the opposition refused to participate and encouraged Egyptians to vote against the new constitution. After the first of two rounds, however, the constitution appeared to be winning just over 50 percent approval.

The new constitution cuts back the power of the presidency, since parliament must approve the prime minister. It forbids the military from trying civilians. It says media outlets do not need government approval and cannot be suspended, closed or their assets be confiscated without a judicial decree. It allows freedom of worship for Christians and Jews, and their religious laws to organize their civil status and religious affairs.

But secularists also complained that ambiguities in the law could allow Islamists excessive latitude, especially on minority and women's rights. The constitution stipulated that Egypt's political system is based on democracy and the Shura, a form of Islamic consultation, potentially opening the way for religious law to infiltrate politics. It also made insulting the prophets of all three monotheistic religions illegal.

The vote for a new parliament is tentatively expected two months after a new constitution is adopted. Then the new parliament will have to begin dealing with Egypt's enormous economic challenges—in a climate of deep distrust.

Tunisia

Tunisia's democratic transition has been relatively smooth compared to other countries in transition. But it faces three major challenges in 2013—a crippled economy, a constitutional referendum, and new elections for a permanent government—all in context of simmering secular-Islamist tensions.

Tunisia reflects the challenge from the young across the Middle East, which has the largest proportionate baby boom in the world. Their discontent both sparked and fueled the uprisings. But they feel few benefits two years later.

Unemployment among Tunisian youth was around 40 percent in December 2012—so high that “hittistes,” the Arabic word for those leaning against the wall, was used to describe the young unemployed. Even more troubling, half of the unemployed young had college degrees.

Nationwide, unemployment was 17 percent—up from 13 percent since the ouster of President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali. Frustrations were reflected in November 2012 when protests erupted in Siliana over poor living conditions and unemployment. More than 300 were wounded in violent clashes with police. Protests and strikes by the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) have become also a frequent challenge.

The coalition government—led by the Islamist Ennahda party and including two secular parties—appeared almost on the brink in late 2012. On December 9, President Moncef Marzouki's secular Congress for the Republic Party announced that it might pull out of the coalition if the Ennahda-led government refused to form a technocrat cabinet to tackle economic problems, especially unemployment.

Vigilantism and violence by ultraconservative Salafis have also spawned political tension and security problems. During 2012, Salafis destroyed Sufi shrines, attacked the U.S. embassy, harassed alcohol sellers, and rioted over an art show deemed insulting to Islam. Many secular Tunisians are still not satisfied with the Islamist-led government's promise to crackdown on Salafis.

Debates also still raged over a draft constitution, especially on women's rights, media regulation, and blasphemy laws. As in other countries, a major issue was whether to invest political power primarily in the parliament or an executive presidency.

But Tunisia managed to bypass the debate over Sharia, the most contentious issue in Egypt. Ennahda leaders pledged to retain the language of the 1956 constitution that defined Tunisia as a Muslim Arab country without reference to the role of Islam as the basis of legislation.

The Constituent Assembly is expected to vote on a final draft in the spring of 2013 before highly competitive presidential and parliamentary elections in June.

Libya

In 2013, Libya faces two core problems: security and creating a state from scratch after Moammar Qaddafi's 42-year rule. The new government, slowly forged under Prime Minister Ali Zeidan in October 2012, lacks meaningful authority without professional security forces to ensure stability and rule of law.

Libya has been trying to cope with 300 militias created during the eight-month uprising in 2011. The government registered more than 240,000 armed gunmen in 2012. Some militias coordinated with the central government. Others operated more like gangs and were tied to serious human rights abuses. Few turned in arms, while many have rival political or regional interests they still want to protect. An extremist militia was held responsible for the attack on the American diplomatic mission in Benghazi that killed the U.S. ambassador and three other Americans in September. Libya also has a wider problem—an average of at least four weapons for each of its 6.5 million people.

The big political issue in 2013 will be the basic division of power—whether to create a strong central state operating out of Tripoli or a decentralized state that divvies up power among two or three regions. Many in the eastern province of Cyrenaica—home to about 80 percent of Libya's oil—favored either a federation or autonomy from Tripoli.

But unlike other Arab countries in transition, Libya actually has abundant natural resources to begin rebuilding the country in 2013. It has the largest oil reserves in Africa. And by December 2012, oil production was back to 90 percent of its capability under Qaddafi, with predictions that it could soon set record new production.

At the same time, however, Libyan oil revenues also spurred even wider corruption than during the Qaddafi era, Libyan officials have conceded. And foreign firms needed to help reconstruct war-ravaged areas and develop the petroleum industry were reluctant to work in Libya because of insecurity, creating a catch-22 for the most prosperous country in North Africa.

Yemen

No country in transition faces more challenges than Yemen in 2013. Food shortages, sectarian strife, tribal tensions, a secessionist movement, a divided army, al-Qaida extremists and rampant unemployment have threatened to tear the country apart over the past two years.

Yemen's tribes are just as likely to fight over food and water as they are over politics in 2013. Daily survival is a staggering problem in the Arab world's poorest country. Nearly one-half of its 24 million people are food insecure. The collapse of public services and rise in food prices triggered a humanitarian crisis last September.

Yemen's political transition hinges on a national dialogue conference, originally planned for November 2012 by President Abed Rabbo Mansour al Hadi. Squabbling parties—which include southern secessionists, Shiite insurgents, Sunni Islamists, rival tribes, youth, members of the former ruling party and others—have yet to agree on the timing of reconciliation talks.

Once together, they will confront divisive issues beginning with drafting a new constitution, a process fraught with rivalries between northern and southern factions. In the meantime, deposed President Ali Abdullah Saleh—the only Arab leader not to flee, be arrested or die during the

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This peace brief provides an overview of four “Arab Spring” uprisings and a look ahead to the challenges of 2013. It was co-authored by Robin Wright, author of “Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World” and a distinguished scholar at both the U.S. Institute of Peace and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, and Garrett Nada, a program assistant at USIP’s Center for Conflict Management. Wright blogs at <http://robinwrightblog.blogspot.com> and tweets at @wrightr.

uprisings—is still lurking in the background. The new government’s goal is to hold parliamentary elections in 2014, followed by presidential and local elections.

But the absence of basic law and order further endangers the transition in 2013. Yemen is one of the most heavily armed societies in the world. And it is no stranger to civil war. Various factions and tribal coalitions have been warring on and off since the 1960s. Al-Qaida has threatened Yemen’s security since the late 1990s. The United States reportedly ramped up its drone campaign against al-Qaida in 2012, helping Yemen’s army to push militants out of southern towns captured during the 2011 uprising against Saleh. But new violence erupted in December, as al-Qaida allegedly carried out a chain of assassinations targeting security forces.



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