



Journal of Social and Political Sciences

Alduhaim, Asmaa. (2019), The Enigma of the Arab Spring and its Autumn. In: *Journal of Social and Political Sciences*, Vol.2, No.3, 630-635.

ISSN 2615-3718

DOI: 10.31014/aior.1991.02.03.105

The online version of this article can be found at:
<https://www.asianinstituteofresearch.org/>

Published by:
The Asian Institute of Research

The *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* is an Open Access publication. It may be read, copied, and distributed free of charge according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.

The Asian Institute of Research *Social and Political Sciences* is a peer-reviewed International Journal. The journal covers scholarly articles in the fields of Social and Political Sciences, which includes, but not limited to, Anthropology, Government Studies, Political Sciences, Sociology, International Relations, Public Administration, History, Philosophy, Arts, Education, Linguistics, and Cultural Studies. As the journal is Open Access, it ensures high visibility and the increase of citations for all research articles published. The *Journal of Social and Political Sciences* aims to facilitate scholarly work on recent theoretical and practical aspects of Social and Political Sciences.



ASIAN INSTITUTE OF RESEARCH
Connecting Scholars Worldwide



The Enigma of the Arab Spring and its Autumn

Asmaa Alduhaim¹

¹Department of English, American International College, Kuwait

Abstract

Few years ago, the geographical area of the Arab region witnessed a significant change, where many countries protested against the regime, demanding political reform. Among the very various names, which was used to refer to this movement was the 'Facebook Revolution' and the 'Youth Revolution,' but perhaps the most popular and commonly used is the 'Arab Spring.' This article embarks on explaining the term 'Arab Spring,' and the reasons behind its popularity. This is subsequently followed by brief account of the Arab Spring main events starting with Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. In addition to clarifying the various reasons behind these uprisings. In an attempt to understand the constant critique of the Arab Spring, and the reasons why many label it as a failure, the article suggests THREE fundamental reasons that may have influenced the revolutions outcome and they are the lack of a peaceful transition of power, foreign intervention and the absence of free will. Perhaps these are the reasons to why the Arab Spring is chiefly an Arab Autumn drainage with blood, and lost hope.

Keywords: Bouazizi, Oppression, Islamists, Arab Region, Brotherhood, Foreign Intervention, Freedom

1. Why Call it a Spring?

The so-called 'Arab Spring' is a series of peaceful demonstrations that erupted in several Arab countries in late 2010. The name 'Arab Spring' is very controversial, and many politicians and critics argued that it is a misnomer. Whilst others explain that using the term is merely as a metaphor that represents hope, rebirth fecundity, and a symbol of a better world (Dabashi, 2012). According to Zimmer, using the metaphor 'political spring' to indicate renewal and change dates back to ancient times (2011). He further illustrates with an example of using 'seasons' to refer to political changes in Shakespeare's Richard III play (2011):

"Now is the winter of our discontent, made glorious summer by this sun of York."

Likewise, Cook claims that throughout history, using the metaphor 'spring' to refer to political changes and movements was to signify the birth of a new life (2014:1). In addition, its use extended to the modern era where it was used to refer to 'the Prague Spring,' which refers to the liberalisation of Czechoslovakia from the Soviet Union in the late 1960s (2014:3).

In an attempt to address the origin and meaning behind this label, Gelvin (2012:240) claims that people are mainly using the metaphor 'Arab Spring' due to its popularity and for recognition purposes. He further argues that the term is misrepresentative of the uprising and justifies his argument with three reasons. First, all of these uprisings started in winter, which would not make an inspiring and appropriate title. Second, the metaphor that the word 'spring' refers to is joy and renewal, which was proven otherwise by the ongoing catastrophes in the Middle East. Finally, the mere reason that this title is already taken, since the phrase was originally used in 2005 to refer to certain events that occurred in the Arab World as a response to the American invasion of Iraq back in 2003 (Gelvin 2012:241).

Al-Safty (2011) offers a comprehensive analysis of the 'Arab Spring' phenomenon and the reasons behind its controversial name. He writes (2011), unlike the many names the events were described with such as revolution, uprising and rebelling that has a negative connotation to it, the word 'spring' has a neutral, positive and a poetic connotation. Al-Safty added (2011); there are several reasons behind choosing the title 'Arab Spring.' Firstly, how the word *spring* is usually associated with change and youth, and this is especially true because there were a large fraction of youths among the protesters, and they demanded the change. Secondly, the term *spring* usually represents hope and optimism, which all of these uprising countries were hoping for a new life (Al-Safty 2011).

Similarly, Whitehead (2014) gives an account of how the term 'Arab Spring' is a result of an article by Marc Lynch (2011), who associated the term to Obama's administration equivalent of the 2005 Arab Spring in response to the number of different uprisings and demonstrations that appeared in the Arab region during different times. Regardless of the popularity of the term 'Arab Spring,' other people used different names such as 'The Youth Uprising.' This is due to the huge role the youth played in mobilising these demonstrations and encouraging all factions in the society to engage in the uprising (Sadiki, 2014). Amongst the other names are these related to social media for the huge part it played as a tool in organising these uprisings are 'Facebook Revolution,' 'Twitter Revolution' and 'Social Media Revolution' (Bossio, 2014:22).

2. The Tunisian Spark

The blossoming of the Arab Spring was unfolded to the world by the end of 2010; and it was then followed by a sequence of events. Tarek el-Tayyib Mohamed Ben Bouazizi, a young Tunisian man, who was born to a poor family in the town of Sidi Bouzid in 1984 was unable to complete his studies, therefore started working and became a fruit-seller in the marketplace. Bouazizi was harassed by council inspector Faida Hamdy, who requested money to allow him to keep his business. In this regards, Stokel-Walker states, Bouazizi refused to pay her 'hush money,' and began arguing with him to protect his only livelihood, Hamdy ended up slapping Bouazizi in the face. A cultural earthquake occurred" (2011:27). It was not merely a matter of livelihood to Bouazizi, but rather his pride and dignity; thus, he went to the council to complain, demanding that he meets the governor. Surely, Bouazizi was not able to resolve his problem or meet any officials, thus he was irritated, shattered, and upset about how unfair the situation has become in his country. Sadly, he set himself on fire right in front of the governor's building, and died days later on 4 January 2011 (Filiu, 2011). This incident sparked the Tunisian revolution, and was the ignition the region was waiting for.

Shortly after Bouaziz's death, Tunisian men and women, both elderlies and youth began took to the streets, and the demonstrations began. In late December 2010, the mass mobilization began, and clashes between protesters and the police grew. People protested against marginalization, high rate of unemployment, and the regime's corruption and demanded the resignation of Ben Ali (Al-Saleh, 2015). Only a few days later, on January 14th, President Ben Ali decided to flee the country and seek asylum in Saudi Arabia. This was an unprecedented day in the Arab world, where the will of the people toppled the regime. After witnessing the success of the Tunisian revolution, many countries like Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria decided to protest against the dictators and overthrow the regime.

In Egypt, there were many political movements and protests throughout the years, but unfortunately, they were never successful. *Kefaya* for instance, was among the very popular movements that were established in 2004-2005

to demand political reform, and was the first to demand the overthrow of Mubarak's regime (Jones, 2007:16). Observing how the events unfolded in Tunisia, Egyptian activists called for a protest on January 25, to protest the horrendous conditions the country have reached of poverty, corruption, diseases, oppression, lack of healthcare, unemployment, and deteriorating education.

A wave of demonstrations erupted on January 25, 2011, where protesters were heading to Tahrir Square in Cairo and camped there. Three days later, on Friday 28, 200, 000 people flooded Cairo to join the demonstration (Gerbaudo, 2013:27). Clashes arose between pro-Mubarak demonstrators and protesters in Tahrir Square leading to the killing and injuring of many civilians. After days of demonstrating against Mubarak's regime, threats arose of marching to the Presidential Palace. Mubarak finally responded and announced his resignation in a speech delivered by the vice president of Egypt and chief of intelligence Omar Suleiman on February 11.

In Libya, all political parties were banned, thus there were not any political activities, and any political activists would be dealt with harshly (Sullivan, 2009). Nonetheless, people felt the glimpse of hope watching neighbouring countries overthrew their regimes. On 17th of February, protests spread across the country from Tripoli to Bani Walid to Al-Bayda, demanding Algaddafi to resign. The Government forces responded with live ammunition at protesters in Benghazi, killing approximately 100 civilians (Haddad, Bsheer, and Abu-Rish, 2012:139). Throughout the months, soldiers and government personnel start to defect from the regime leading to its gradual collapse. On 17th March 2011, the NATO authorised a UN military intervention, due to the UN authorized military intervention the increased number of clashes among protesters and the regime and the killing of civilians. During that time, the rebels started to contain the situation in Libya slowly and the manhunt for Algaddafi, who was hiding in Tripoli, began. Several months later, on 20th October 2011, Algaddafi was captured and killed.

Similarly to Egypt, the demonstration in Yemen dates back to 2007, where thousands have been killed, injured, or imprisoned. Ali Abdullah Saleh attempted to control the situation and stop the demonstration in Yemen by calling for debates and negotiations with the public and attempted to kill protesters by hiring thugs. Yemenis, however, were defiant and took to the streets in February in front of Sanaa University and many other landmarks to demand reform. Saleh was forced to leave the country on June 3, 2011, due to an attack on his presidential palace and because he was injured.

Unfortunately, this was not the case in Syria, where the peaceful demonstration turned into a brutal war and have not yet ended. The demonstrations started on March 18th, and quickly spread around different parts of Syria. However, the military viciously killed millions of Syrians and forced many others to flee the country.

3. What Triggered the Arab Spring?

"Why now" is a question that has always been asked by many people around the world, when they first heard about the demonstrations in the Arab region. This was not an abrupt Arab awakening; on the contrary, it was a result of years of tyranny, suffering, and unsuccessful attempts to overthrow the corrupted regimes. Throughout the years, and after numerous attempts of revolution, 2011 was a defining year to the entire Arab region, as it established change and gave hope of a better future. It could be argued that the domino effect played a significant role in initiating the uprisings, particularly because these countries shared similar motives. Regardless to each country's unique and local factors, they all shared oppression, corruption, population growth that led to unemployment and famine, and evidently a decline of living standards. This section will explain the following factors: oppression and lack of freedom and famine and unemployment.

3.1 Oppression and the Hunger for Freedom

Unfortunately, the Arab region has always been deprived of democracy, where freedom, equality, and social justice are meaningless words. For years and years, many Arab countries suffered from the regime's injustices, repression, and tyranny. Bamyeh (2012:50) suggests that the idea of 'president for life' was the common rule in the Arab

region, since most of the presidents rule for over 10 years. For example, in Tunisian president ruled for 20 years, Mubarak in Egypt for 30 years and Algaddafi for 40 years (Howard & Hussain, 2013:1). Perhaps this is why Arab nationalism and passion for freedom is one of the most potent ideological forces in the region.

Unfortunately, the region lacks some of the most important rights such as freedom of expression, regardless to the fact that it is guaranteed by international human rights treaties. Arafa (2013:170) explains this as follows:

Most Arab countries scored poorly on indices of freedom of expression, including press and academic freedoms; freedom of assembly, demonstration, and open public discussion; freedom of association and civil society organisation; the rule of law, including an independent judiciary, fair trials and freedom from exile and/or torture; and personal social freedoms, including gender and minority equalities.

3.2 Famine

Even though the Middle East region is known for its agricultural resources, many Arab countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco, and Sudan were considered vulnerable to a food crisis (Gelvin 2015:21). This is might be due to the sudden increase in the food prices. For instance, in 2007, there was a 'bread riot' in Morocco, Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Egypt, and Lebanon (Gelvin 2015:22). The crisis was not mainly revolved around the spike in the prices, but also the shortage of food. "Egyptians fought each other in bread queues, and soldiers were drafted in to bake loaves" (Noueihed & Warren 2012:24).

3.3 Unemployment

The number of youth unemployment in the region spiked as the World Bank report in 2008 states that the youth unemployment was estimated of 30% and about 45% for a university graduate in many Arab nations (Zemni, 2014). The unemployment dilemma led to poverty and famine, and most importantly, increased the gap between the rich and poor, only to empower the ruling elite. For instance, the rate of unemployment was estimated of 24% among youths of 15-24 years old in Egypt (Feiler, 2013). According to Nour, the number of unemployment in the Arab region due to the challenges of unstable economic growth is indeed is nearly three times the average of the world (2016:49).

3.4 Social Justice and Corruption

It is clearly evident that social justice and providing equal opportunities and equality among citizens was not a privilege in many Arab countries, who called for social reforms, including human and political rights. Social injustices can be attributed to the vastly spread corruption in the region since only people close to the regime can get opportunities and take advantage of varied resources. For example, in Libya, the regime attempted to provide a sense of social justice that fell short on the human rights scale, this can be clearly observed of Saif Al-Islam ownership of about 95% of the oil, and its distribution to his circle (Gelvin 2012:76).

4. The Aftermath of the Arab Spring

Eight years later, there is a controversy of the Arab Spring success and how it has been hijacked by the very same regimes or Islamists. Many political analysts, such as Bradley (2012:3), describe these uprisings as a failure. Bradley argues that these uprisings were anything but democratic; in fact, it was an Islamic movement that aimed to impose Islamic laws (2012: 3). On the other hand, some relate the failure of these uprisings simply to the lack of freedom, understanding social justice, and most importantly the absence of democratic institutes that would facilitate the transition of power or honest elections.

Looking at the Arab region today, one can only wonder about the consequences of the mass mobilisation, the protests, the killings of civilians, and the overthrown regimes. Perhaps Tunisia is the only country to escape the anarchy and gained some democracy, elsewhere though, very little has changed. While progress in reaching political reforms and establishing stability has been made in Tunisia, there remain critical issues related to

unemployment, economic reforms, corruption, and police brutality to overcome. According to the International Labour Organization, youth unemployment remains high at 37% (Merino 2014: 132).

Unlike Tunisia, Egyptians are still fighting for political and economic reforms, Yemenis, Libyans, and Syrians are living in a malicious civil war until today. These countries have been suffering tremendously, where the economy has dropped, killings, impressments have increased, and life has become impossible to bear. In Libya, the uprising created a blood-soaked catastrophe of civil war and the emergence of a military group led by Khalifa Haftar after Libya's failure to adhere to a peaceful political transition. Haftar and an array of Libya's powerful army started fighting the Tripoli revolution to establish himself as the recognised regime of the country. Likewise, the fierce Syrian revolution exposed the illegitimacy of the regime and how lethal and adamant it is, leaving Bashar al-Assad as the last president standing still after the Arab Spring.

The atrocities the Arab region witnessed, and the drastic changes of toppling tyranny was not enough to label the Arab Spring as a successful movement, but rather criticised and labelled as the Arab Autumn by the world. I hereby, suggest the reasons behind the 'failure' of the Arab Spring uprisings. *First*, overthrowing the president was not enough to overthrow the entire corrupted regime. In countries like Libya and Egypt, people were not familiar with the concept of an honest and free election process, thus, there was a huge absence of political institutes to observe the transition, and ensure a democratic and peaceful one. On the contrary, people drifted from their main goal of political and democratic change, to religious and political conflicts. In Egypt, many people supported the Muslim Brotherhood, which is a big political party in the country oppressed by Mubarak's regime and was awaiting the chance to emerge and participate in the political sphere. As a result, the people elected Egypt's first democratically elected president Mohamed Morsi, who was later overthrown by a military coup d'état in 3 July 2013 and replaced by a regime similar to Mubarak's. On the other hand, Libyans had no political parties or an independent military base but rather military detachments governed by Algaddafi's sons, hence there was an absent of an author which would help to elect a democratic president. Thus, after the revolution, Haftar gained the support of many military personnel, and gradually gained control of many Libyan cities. Also, in Yemen, due to the absence of an army that would facilitate the transformation process of the current regime, there was a rise of Al Qaeda and Houthis, which initiated an ongoing civil war.

This leads us to the *second* factor, which is the foreign and international intervention, where foreign powers played a major role in meddling with these countries' internal affairs. For instance, the war in Libya began due to the intervention of many Arab countries each supporting particular religious or political parties, such as Qatar and Turkey and their support to the Muslim Brotherhood, against other countries who are openly against the Arab Spring and the Brotherhood such as the United Arab Emirates and Egypt. This is also the case in Yemen and Syria, where people are engaged in civil war due to their support to the current regime or simply to oppose it. In Syria, the regime remained intact, constantly killing civilians by live ammunition, and relying on international intervention to gain more power against the rebels.

Third, the absence of free will and democracy. Sadly, the region is strongly governed by conservative and religious norms. This led to the emergence of sectarian movements and extremist groups that were dominating the political scene, and divided the people into different sects. This is clearly evident in Egypt, during the 2011 elections when the Brotherhood party won 235 chairs, the extremist Salafists 121 seats, and only 35 out of 508 to the main secular party in Egypt (Moghadam, 2013: 402).

5. Conclusion

This article presents a comprehensive account of the political circumstances prior to Tunisian uprising, which was the spark the Arab region was ripping for. The Jasmine revolution led to a drastic change in the Arab region, and the uprisings in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. The article provides the common factors that gradually led to these revolutions. Surely, the Arab region suffers a great deal of corruption, where only people in power are the ones to benefit from the country's resources and wealth, whereas the people are suffering from poverty, unemployment, and injustices. These factors alongside oppression and years of dictatorship led to the sudden

awakening of Arab countries that probably was not prepared to engage in honest political elections, a peaceful transition of power, a complete overthrow of the regime and its followers, and most importantly a secular election. Unfortunately, this was not the case, instead, countries suffered internally from the emergence of various oppressed parties that were fighting for control, in addition to the external intervention from neighbouring countries. I believe that the Arab Spring succeeds in what it initially aimed to, which is to overthrow the regime, but its aftermath is what went wrong.

References

- Al-Safty, A. (2011). Al-rā' al- 'rbī: Mādhā ī nī ? [The Arab Spring: What Does it Mean?]. Retrieved 22 Nov. 2016, from Alarabiya.net: <<http://www.alarabiya.net/views/2011/08/05/160884.html>>
- Al-Saleh, A. (2015). *Voices of the Arab spring: Personal stories from the Arab revolutions*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Arafa, M. M. (2013). New Media and the Arab Spring. In K. Al-Jaber & K. A. Al-Sayed (eds.), *Arab Media in a Turbulent World*. Doha: Dar Al-Sharq Publications.
- Bamyeh, M. (2012). The Tunisian Revolution: Initial Reflections. In Haddad, B., Bsheer, R., & Abu-Rish, Z. (eds.), *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings*, 49-58.
- Bossio, D. (2014). Journalism during the Arab Spring: Interactions and Challenges. In Bebawi, S., & Bossio, D. (eds.), *Social Media and The Politics Of Reportage: The Arab Spring*, 11-32.
- Cook, J. W. (2014). *Spring as a seasonal political metaphor: the Prague and Arab Spring in presidential rhetoric* (Doctoral dissertation).
- Dabashi, H. (2012). *The Arab Spring: the End of Postcolonialism*. London: Zed Books Ltd.
- Feiler, G. (2013). The Economic Implications of the Arab Spring. In Inbar, E. (ed.), *The Arab Spring, Democracy and Security: Domestic and International Ramifications*. New York: Routledge.
- Filiu, J.-P. (2011). *The Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Gelvin, J. L. (2012). Conclusion: the Arab World at the Intersection of the National and Transnational. In Reibman, M. (ed.), *The Arab Spring: Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, 238-255.
- Gerbaudo, P. (2013). The 'Kill Switch' as 'Suicide Switch': Mobilizing Side Effects of Mubarak's Communication Blackout. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 9(2).
- Haddad, B., Bsheer, R., & Abu-Rish, Z. (2012). *The Dawn of the Arab Uprisings: End of an Old Order?* London: Pluto Press.
- Howard, P. N., & Hussain, M. M. (2013). *Democracy's Fourth Wave? Digital Media and the Arab Spring*. Oxford: Oxford University Press on Demand.
- Lynch, M. (Feb 2011). *Responding to the Worst Speech Ever*. Available at: <<http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/02/10/responding-to-the-worst-speech-ever/>>, [Accessed 3 August 2017].
- Merino, N. (2014). *Unemployment*. Greenhaven Publishing LLC.
- Moghadam, V. M. (2013). What is democracy? Promises and perils of the Arab Spring. *Current Sociology*, 61(4), 393-408.
- Noueihed, L., & Warren, A. (2012). *The Battle for the Arab Spring: Revolution, Counter-Revolution and the Making of a New Era*. Connecticut: Yale University Press.
- Nour, S. M. (2016). *Economic systems of innovation in the Arab region*. Springer.
- Sadiki, L. (2014). *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*. New York: Routledge.
- Stokel-Walker, C. (2011). *The Revolution Will Be Tweeted? How Social Media Inspired—and Failed—the Middle Eastern Revolutionaries of 2011*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press.
- Sullivan, K. L. (2008). *Muammar Al-Qaddafi's Libya*. Minnesota: Twenty-First Century Books.
- Whitehead, L. (2014). On the 'Arab Spring': Democratization and Related Political Seasons. In Sadiki, L. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, 2.
- Zemni, S. (2014). Elements of a Political Sociology. In Sadiki, L. (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, 77.
- Zimmer, B. (2011). The 'Arab Spring' Has Sprung. *Visual Thesaurus*, May, 20.