

Multiplying Tensions Two years after the first uprisings, the Arab world is full of political contradictions

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Kurz gefasst: Zwei Jahre nach der Arabellion ist die Situation in der gesamten Region äußerst widersprüchlich. Die alten Mächte wie Militär und traditionelle Eliten können die Erneuerung weiterhin bedrohen. Nationalismus geht einher mit einem intensiven Austausch über die Staatsgrenzen hinweg. Der politische Islam hat im Aufstand eine potenziell offene Gesellschaft denkbar werden lassen. Die alte europäische Denkweise, dass Religion nicht mit säkularen Werten zu vereinbaren ist, wird in dieser Situation widerlegt. Die Lage ist offen, der Ausgang ungewiss.

Bliss was it during those rebellions to be alive, and to be young, on the streets, was very heaven. Or so it seemed to millions of women and men in early 2011, shortly after the first protests in Tunisia rocked the foundations of the whole Arab world. Public ecstasy flourished. Freed from fear, often for the first time, citizens found themselves dancing, singing and kissing strangers in the streets. They talked of dignity and justice, freedom and democracy. Bin Laden was bypassed. Political exiles came home. The first fair and clean elections in living memory happened. Monarchs wooed parliaments. Dictators were everywhere pushed onto the back foot. Several were toppled; a few went on trial, or fled into exile; others, among them Gaddafi and al-Assad, fought back, like maniacs, using murderous tactics and weapons.

Still in their infancy, the popular upheavals have shaken practically every political regime within a swathe of territory stretching from Morocco through Egypt and the Gulf states to the Levant and beyond, to Iraq and Iran. During the first few months, the radical democratic spirit of the rebellions was striking, in several ways. Judged comparatively, they took the 1989 spirit of non-violent velvet rebellions in central-eastern Europe to higher levels. Faced by much worse state violence and terror, the Arab uprisings drew the poison of state violence. Remarkable was their sensitivity to the grave dangers and high costs of using violent means to get their way.

Judged by global standards, the revolutionary identification with the theory and practice of civil society (*al-mutjama' al-madani*) was nothing new, but it helps explain the unusual affection for public space. Past revolutions witnessed the storming of the presumed Bastilles of power: government headquarters, presidential palaces, post offices and telecommunications buildings were the usual targets of public action. The Arab upheavals rejected the principle of sovereign power in this sense. They instead embraced public space.

Sites of refusal of concentrated violent power, places like Boulevard Habib Bourguiba, Tahrir Square and Pearl Square meant different things to many people. They functioned as reminders that ruling powers always depend upon the consent of the powerless. They were gatherings of the afraid, calls for others to join the resistance, places where the act of gathering consoled, discharged fears and raised hopes. The public sites of resistance were zones of joy fed by poetry, music and literature; spaces of unfettered discussion and the feverish making of political plans. They were also broadcasting studios, political commentary boxes that issued calls for others to take note of their demands, to witness their calls for justice and democratic freedom.

The struggles for public space for a time proved infectious throughout the region. These were not straightforwardly twitter rebellions or Facebook revolutions. Fuelled by material poverty and political injustice, these uprisings were marked by an unusual public awareness of the political importance of digitally networked media. Thanks to outlets such as *Al Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*, never before did so many people instantly witness dramatic political events on a global scale. Citizens understood that news is by definition powerful information still unknown to others, which helps explain the remarkable first-time experiments in the arts of gathering and circulating news. Huge crowds in Alexandria

watched themselves live on satellite television, hoping the coverage would protect them from police or military annihilation. Helped by web platforms operated by exiles, tweets and blogs and video footage uploaded onto the Internet powerfully described situations both terrible and hopeful. Everything, even the shooting of protesters and innocent bystanders at point-blank range, was recorded for posterity, in real time.

Two years later, all things considered, have the convulsions in the Arab world been a boon for the spirit and institutions of power-sharing democracy?

It's much too early to tell. It must be remembered that revolutions resemble extended earthquakes. Their historical significance is known only well after their onset. Revolutions take time. They have their own time. They alter people's perception of time, multiply their doubts and add to their list of unknowns.

Look carefully at the present mixed-up trends. The tough job of transforming corrupted police states into power-sharing democracies that foster social and environmental justice has barely begun. It is early days for electoral systems, competitive political parties, feisty parliaments, independent judiciaries, and constitutions fit for democracy. Uncorrupted watchdog and guide-dog institutions, independently-minded scrutiny bodies that are essential conditions of monitory democracy, are weak.

Throughout the region, many not-so-new forces are on the loose. The power of the military and disaffected elites to wreck a transition to democracy remains. Memories of terrible uncivil wars, of the Algerian type, are plentiful; but so, too, are stocks of weapons in private hands. Poverty of heart-breaking proportions and unemployment, particularly among young people, are rife. Healthcare, housing, and other basic public service amenities are in short supply; chains of market production and distribution remain broken. Dysfunctional households, shattered by poverty and victimized by violence, are commonplace.

The list of challenges is long, and may well grow longer. Judged in terms of democratic principles, the most striking fact about the region is its utter contradictoriness. Many novel things are happening. Political Islamists are on the rise. They are challenging the standard political science presumption that democracy requires a binding sense of national identity backed by a sovereign territorial state. Public vows of support for brothers and sisters of the wider *umma* are common. Regional political thinking is a felt imperative. How to re-shape the region politically is another matter, but political Islam has managed for the moment to breathe life into the body of post-national democratic ideals.

Nationalist impulses are weakened by multiple factors. There is plenty of patriotism framed by vibrant local dialects. The common language of Arabic and shared traditions play a significant role. There is a vibrant sense of the importance of spreading news and building cross-border interactions and the need for people of one country to learn from citizens of other countries. The widespread perception of a common opponent (police state dictatorships backed by the West) plays a role, as does the deliberate production and circulation of a common democratic rhetoric of political symbols and tactics.

Religious secularity also serves to prevent outbreaks of nationalism. The strange oxymoron is needed to make sense of the Arab world convulsions. Infused with a spirit of religious secularity, the great upheavals have called into question the old European modernist presumption that secularity is the foe and successor of religion. In Tunisia, Rashid Ghannouchi's public affirmation of the principle of religious compromise (*wasatiyyah*) based on respect for both worldliness and belief in God captures the trend. Hence calls for the separation of the state and religion have been as rare as their opposite, demands (for instance by Yemeni cleric al-Zindani) for the replacement of existing forms of government with an Islamic state.

If political Islam feeds the new democratic virtue of religious secularity, bitter public resistance to the drafting and adoption of the new Egyptian constitution



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and the recent murder of Tunisian opposition leader Shokri Belaid show how the resurgence of religiosity is a deeply conflicted political trend. Seen in terms of a transition to democracy, political Islam has to perform delicate balancing acts: it must satisfy its militant supporters with substantial domestic reforms; outflank armed resistance and neutralise military opposition; negotiate with the West; forge different relationships with the states of Israel and Iran; and push towards a new regional settlement that remains as yet undefined.

Matters are complicated by regional power vacuums and double standards. The bell tolls for Western hypocrisy. The popular rebellions shattered the dalliance with Gaddafi's oil-and-gas rich Libya. The heavy investment of the United States and Israel in dependable police dictatorships (Mubarak's Egypt, al-Assad's Syria, Saleh's Yemen) was undermined. The status quo snapped.

Yet, for the moment, the outcomes have crazed qualities. The fading imperial democracy, the United States, backs Israel, a state whose political leaders talk democracy and human rights yet exclude their own Arab subjects, build walls around Palestinian people, whose enforced patience with their miserable lot cannot last. The American democracy brought massive violence and suffering to Iraq, which now resembles a comprador state aligned with Iran, which backs the criminal Syrian regime, which the United States wants to axe. In support of "democracy" against "terror", American drones, their use unsanctioned by Congress, kill and terrorise people, many Muslims among them. The United States and its Western allies meanwhile back rich little Qatar. Home to *Al Jazeera*, a vital spreader of democratic values, Qatar helps fund and support Hamas, which in the name of self-determination crushes dissent within its own ranks. The Western-backed Saudi Arabia dictatorship clings on for dear life, fears its own people, whom it plies with lavish hand-outs, knowing that they're ultimately the source of its own repressive power.

That's not the end of Western democratic double standards. The United States and its Western allies silently consent to martial law and terror in Bahrain, whose oppressed Shiite majority refuse violence and champion the cause of democracy and human rights against a Sunni monarchy backed by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states. The West finds a new ally in the Muslim Brotherhood government of Egypt, whose democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi talks like Robespierre: "My duty is to move forward with the goals of the revolution and eliminate all obstacles from the past".

Political Islamists like Morsi are learning that democratisation is a wild horse. They hunger for state power; after a long history of underground resistance and suffering, understandably they don't want to squander deserved gains. Yet in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the epicentre of the upheavals, political Islamists are discovering that electoral victory and governing often require give-and-take pragmatism. As they set their sights on state power, they're learning as well that state structures, where they exist, have been twice cursed by colonialism: their efficiency and effectiveness are limited and, in the eyes of many people, they're simply not legitimate. That's why those who occupy the seats of state power in the name of the people quickly find themselves opposed by long queues of real people: trade unionists, liberal minorities, *salafis* hostile to women, atheists, old-fashioned secularists, Arab nationalists.

Unfamiliar dynamics multiply; the social science habit of dissecting trends to discover their single meaning proves unhelpful. *Jihadis* contest elections, which they otherwise denounce as an insult to God's sovereignty. Protests against unemployment, government corruption and state violence erupt. Recent disturbances (November 2012) in the Tunisian city of Siliana show that Islamist governments committed to justice are readily accused of propping up systems of injustice. A new regional power, Turkey, itself caught up in an unprecedented democratic transition that defies most textbook descriptions, meanwhile indulges the contradictions. Committed to destroying the al-Assad regime in Syria, sensing that the terrible violence in that country is a proxy regional war, the Turkish government finds itself in the company of a strange assortment of political animals, including militant Kurds, whose struggles for self-determination it does everything to crush.

The ramshackle democracy called Lebanon, governed by a fragile coalition of parties backed by Hezbollah, a supporter of the Syrian dictatorship, harbours violent forces hostile to democracy. Throughout the region, the rule is clear: without a vibrant civil society backed by respect for local versions of human rights and the rule of law, the push for democracy hands opportunities to militias, shadowy armed networks, criminal gangs, kidnappers, assassins. Strange but true: as in Yemen, Syria and Libya, the fight for justice through new forms of democracy breeds new patterns of violent death and destruction.

And so the contraries multiply. Two years after the first breakthroughs, democratic principles are everywhere contradicted by struggles for power that bear little or no resemblance to professed intentions, or defined strategies. Where will all this end? What will historians say in fifty years from now when they look back on the region? Everybody wants to be on the winning side of history, yet nobody knows which side is right, or what winning might mean, or how to get there. Only one thing is certain: the present trends, suffused with contradictions, are not sustainable.

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