

The “Arab Spring”: Any Appellation but Revolutions
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Abstract

This article aims at revisiting, with a view to rebutting, the widespread belief, especially in the West, that the 2010-11 outbursts of popular protests that shook the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region were revolutions. By examining these crises, named the “Arab Spring”, through an analytical lens, hence, it seeks to conclusively demonstrate their unrevolutionary nature. To this end, it inescapably draws on key criteria accumulated from the revised ‘Theory of Revolution’ to gauge the essence of the uprisings. The appraisal, precisely, focuses exclusively on Egypt and Tunisia, the only two countries where regime change materialized.

Keywords: *Theory of revolution, arab spring, middle east and north africa, Egypt, Tunisia.*

« الربيع العربي»: أي تسمية ما عدا ثورات

ملخص

يهدف هذا المقال إلى مراجعة الفكرة الشائعة، خاصة عند الغرب، بأن المظاهرات الشعبية التي هزت منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا (خلال 2010-2011) كانت ثورات وذلك بقصد دحضها. من خلال دراسة هذه الأزمات المسماة “الربيع العربي”، من وجهة نظر تحليلية، يسعى هذا المقال إلى إثبات طابعها غير الثوري بشكل قاطع. لهذا الغرض، يعتمد هذا المقال، أساساً، على معايير مستمدة من “نظرية الثورة”، لأجل تبيان طبيعة الانتفاضات في المنطقة المذكورة. يركز هذا التقييم، بالأخص، على مصر وتونس، البلدين اللذين تجسد فيهما تغيير النظام.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية ثورة، ربيع عربي، شرق أوسط وشمال إفريقيا، مصر، تونس.

Le “Printemps Arabe”: n’importe quelle désignation sauf révolution

Résumé

Cet article a pour but de revoir, dans l’intention de réfuter, l’idée répandue, notamment en Occident, que les manifestations populaires ayant ébranlé la région du Moyen-Orient et l’Afrique du Nord (MOAN), en 2010-11, étaient des révolutions. En étudiant ces crises, appelées “le printemps Arabe”, d’un point de vue analytique, cette étude vise à prouver leur caractère non-révolutionnaire. A cette fin, l’article s’appuie sur les critères tirés de la théorie de la révolution pour juger de la nature de ces soulèvements essentiellement en Egypte et en Tunisie, les deux pays dans lesquels le changement de régime s’est concrétisé.

Mots-clés: *Théorie de révolution, printemps arabe, Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord, Egypte, Tunisie.*

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Introduction:

The “Arab Spring”, the wave of popular protests that shook the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2010-2011, has been chronicled for the generations to come as the fruit of a single brave act of a Tunisian young vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi who set himself ablaze to demur to tyranny in Tunisia. Bouazizi’s self-immolation, allegedly rooted in a slap, the humiliation he incurred at the hands of a policewoman, has thus been taken for granted in many Western scholarly and journalistic accounts as the spark of the MENA crises. In a loosely worded narrative which plainly lacked empirical basis, the crises, driven by popular clamour for the removal of oppressive regimes permeating the region, were hence uncritically treated and perceived as revolutions. In tackling this lack of academic rigour, therefore, the core aim of this article lies in invalidating such widespread perception of the MENA uproar. To this end, the furor is necessarily discussed against background information and terminology drawn from the ‘Theory of Revolution’. With a particular emphasis placed on Tunisia and Egypt wherein dictatorship was assumably extirpated, the study attempts to expose, arguably, the failure of the MENA cataclysm to pass the theoretical test of a revolution. It does so by bringing to light the well documented leaderless character of the alleged revolutions in addition to weighing their outcome against popular demands.

1– The Revolutionary Situation: Theoretical Background

The conditions a socially tumultuous situation has to meet to earn the label revolution remain a scholarly divisive issue. When scrutinizing, for the sake of theorizing, commotion threatening a country’s status quo, scholars, addressing ‘revolution’ from a sociological angle, did not tally over its definition, roots, timing, and duration. Due to such controversy, inquiries into the phenomenon in the course of time begot a multitude of theoretical works which were classified by the American sociologist Jack Goldstone into three distinct generations whilst the fourth one is still awaiting to germinate. These were ‘the natural history of revolution’, the ‘general theories of revolution’, and ‘the structural theories of revolution’⁽¹⁾. Academia’s failure to produce a uniform ‘theory of revolution’ that could be used to confirm or disconfirm the revolutionary nature of an agitation shaking a particular society should not be viewed as a stumbling block. Of note, robust, luminous findings coupled with common notions embedded in the definitions of the concept which were brought to light ensuing multiple theorizing attempts, do make up for the lack noted. They remain both useful and reliable references when gauging the essence of a contumacious event, like the “Arab Spring”.

1-1- The Revolution Catalysts:

To start with, attention is called to the genesis of a revolution. As foregrounded previously, there are no specific reasons presaging a revolution. In their incessant endeavours to theorize on the issue, academics unearthed some catalysts. Poverty, in this vein, has been recorded as the oldest instigator. Dating back to Ancient Greece, it had been bespoken by philosopher Plato and his disciple Aristotle as a revolution trigger⁽²⁾. The French sociologist and political theorist Alexis de Tocqueville argued for its antonym, pressing wealth as having the potential to induce a revolution, accordingly⁽³⁾. Gizachew Tiruneh, Associate Professor of Political Science, contributed elucidation to the point. He signaled the positive impact of a healthy economy on education in particular. During thriving economic times, money benefits education, augmenting, hence, its rate as its access is made easier and more open. Education, definitely, abets awareness, exposure to and reception of new ideologies. When cognizance broadens, it may be threatening to the incumbent regime as it is likely to translate into demands not only for the improvement of the existing socio-economic situation, but also for political participation, besides nurturing aspirations for more civil rights. The spectre of revolution looms over a regime, as Tiruneh contended, when the latter demands and aspirations are unsatisfied⁽⁴⁾.

Frustration, another revolution activator, was at the core of two theories. These were the ‘J-Curve theory’, fathered by James C. Davies, and ‘relative deprivation’, established by Ted

Gurr. The former rests on a boom/bust conjuncture. Precisely, it highlights a period of economic expansion during which people's expectations for a better life are hyped up. Such expectations are dashed, however, in the event of a sudden contraction, afflicting, therefore, people psychologically. Buoyancy is soon replaced by frustration which bursts into violence when reaching a flash point⁽⁵⁾. The latter is based on an argument which is not quite dissimilar. Popular frustration, in this vein, stems from a gap which comes into being from what people think they deserve to get from society because of its palpable economic potentials and what they will actually receive. If people's expected dues are met with a protracted deprivation, frustration heightens as does its likelihood to transmute into a revolution⁽⁶⁾.

Indeed, the list of stimulants diversified as Goldstone added demography which formed the gist of his theory. According to the latter, what makes a state vulnerable to revolution is population growth wherein the youth rate is conspicuously high. From Goldstone's eye view, population expansion has detrimental effects on the economy as it brings about inflation. This fact renders a state financially crippled, that is, unable to accommodate the rising professional ambitions of the elites, causing, consequently, elites' internal struggles, disaffection with and alienation from the state. In addition to the existing popular grievances nursed by the ailing economy, this elites' condition makes the threat of a revolution imminent when coupled with a high rate of youth in the expanded population⁽⁷⁾.

Goldstone, hence, provided insightful information pertaining to the role the youth could play in begetting an environment conducive to revolution. He played up, in this respect, the threat posed to the state by a more educated youth which he bared as a plausible by-product of population growth. More educated people result in an increasing demand for elite positions that cannot be gratified given the state's financial burdens, as he noted. Rivalry for limited job opportunities explains, hence, the foregoing elite conflicts⁽⁸⁾. Educated or not, the same scholar perceived youth as provocateur of "instability." These "large youth cohorts," with "fewer responsibilities and careers" have a propensity to embrace new and extremist ideas that can be challenging to the status quo. This is why they "are relatively easily mobilized"⁽⁹⁾. In this context, he gave prominence to "a large youth bulge an expansion of the 15 to 25 age cohort"⁽¹⁰⁾ which he documented as having historical precedents in "political crisis"⁽¹¹⁾.

1-2- The Revolution's Defining Features:

Contrary to its causation, there is some visible common ground among scholars on what a revolution is besides its being, by definition, an event aiming primarily at overthrowing the incumbent regime. For the American sociologist Theda Skocpol, a revolution means changes that affect the entire socio-political fabric of a society. Taking place, necessarily, in no time, they are the result of contumacy emanating from and powered by the lower class. "Social revolutions are rapid, basic transformations of a society's state and class structures, and they are accompanied and in part carried through by class-based revolts from below," as she put it⁽¹²⁾. The following is a sample of definitions taken from the reviewed literature on the concept. In each definition, it is noteworthy, the rapidity of change which occurs with the materialization of the ancien régime is substantiated and is unveiled, just like regime change, as an intrinsic element beyond doubt. Each lifts the veil on additional information typical of the concept. In Jeff Goodwin's conceptual clarification, the changes wreaked are inclusive. They do not only transcend, in their nature, the socio-political ones, but are, most importantly, instantaneous. "[R]evolutions entail not only mass mobilization and regime change, but also more or less rapid and fundamental social, economic and/or cultural change, during or soon after the struggle for state power"⁽¹³⁾. From S. N. Eisenstadt's standpoint, a revolution "connotes upheaval, rapid change, discontinuity, and violence"⁽¹⁴⁾. For Samuel P. Huntington, it is "a rapid, fundamental, and violent domestic change in the dominant values and myths of society, in its political institutions, social structure, leadership and government activity and policies"⁽¹⁵⁾.

Scholarly unanimity over the inclusion of the qualifier 'basic', or its synonym 'fundamental' in the conception of revolution, it merits attention, forcefully communicates

another key detail. Besides being imperatively swift, the ensuing transformation should be profound, or “radical,” as qualified by Goldstone⁽¹⁶⁾. This is reinforced by the notion ‘discontinuity’ underscored by Eisenstadt. Academic concurrence extends to ‘violence’ as another feature. While it is too obvious in Eisenstadt’s definition and in that of Huntington through the use of the adjective ‘violent’, it is implicitly pressed by Scokpol and Goodwin through the words ‘revolt’ and ‘struggle’, respectively.

Albeit part of its semantic composition, violence is, according to Hannah Arendt, not a revolution hallmark as it is a characteristic it shares with “coups d’état” and “palace revolutions” as well with a key remark pertaining to change underscored. In the former, that is, revolution, change caused is expansive and inclusive of all domains. In the latter, to wit coups d’état and palace revolutions, it is restricted to “the sphere of government” and in which “power changes hands from one man to another, from one clique to another, depending on the form of government,” as Arendt contended⁽¹⁷⁾. In the same spirit, a revolt, whose synonym is a rebellion, is too a violent event. Unlike revolution, however, it is not threatening to the existing order as it can be easily quashed⁽¹⁸⁾.

The inclusion of ‘class-based revolts’ in Arendt’s definition, and ‘mass mobilization’ in Goodwin’s description bring to view another defining feature. The fact of underlying a revolution is the participation of commoners. “The most indubitable feature of a revolution,” as Leon Trotsky argued, is “the direct interference of the masses”⁽¹⁹⁾. Besides the degree of change stressed earlier, what further distinguishes a ‘revolution’ from a ‘coup d’état’ are the masses. A coup, in this context, “does not depend on a mass following” as it is “an elitist exercise”⁽²⁰⁾. Mass mobilization, it isdeserves attention, is the elite’s accomplishment⁽²¹⁾. Without the elite, popular outburst of anger cannot be more than a revolt/rebellion which is, as said previously, easily crushed by the incumbent regime. It is only when underpinned by the elite that a revolt/rebellion can metamorphose into a revolution⁽²²⁾.

In that vein, to “make or try to make a revolution” requires “two groups with different sorts of political capacities and ambitions,” as Michael Waltzer wrote through Vladimir Lenin’s lens. These groups are “a revolutionary class whose discontent provides the energy and whose members supply the manpower, and an intellectual vanguard that provides ideology and leadership,” as he argued. A revolution, to wit, is a requisite synergy between the masses, aka, the “revolutionary class” or “class consciousness,” on the one hand, and the elite, aka, the “intellectual vanguard”, the “vanguard” or the “vanguard consciousness,”⁽²³⁾ on the other. Besides mobilizing the masses, providing organization, and assuming leadership, the vanguard is indeed the provoker of change as it has “a revolutionary perspective, program, and trained cadres,” without which “there can be no successful revolution”⁽²⁴⁾. A revolution, briefly, ushers in an incontestably fresh period which unfolds with the creation of a new regime whose break with the past should be manifest in drastic, imminent changes. The latter stem from the elite’s road map, the very weapon used to wrest power from the incumbent regime.

2– The Arab Spring Put to the Revolution Test:

Against the foregoing theoretical background information about revolution, the following debate is an endeavour to scrutinize the MENA crises from a tighter academic and critical perspective with a special emphasis placed on Egypt and Tunisia whose dictators were deposed. Within a purely revolutionary context and drawing from the revolutionary lexicon, therefore, the discussion displays the etiology of the uprisings, reveals not only the well documented state of the vanguard, but also popular demands that it juxtaposes unavoidably with the outcome. It does so with a view to exposing the failure of the “Arab Spring” to pass the revolution test.

2-1- Etiology of the “Arab Spring”:

Many scholarly and journalistic accounts captured socio-economic woes underlying Mohamed Bouazizi’s self-immolation as the genesis of the Arab crises. Alasdair McKay, for instance, pressed this “[o]ne man’s self-immolation” as the trigger of “[v]iolent

demonstrations and riots” in Tunisia which denounced “high unemployment, corruption, food inflation and lack of many political freedoms”⁽²⁵⁾. Such multifaceted tribulation, however, was not exclusive to Tunisia as “[m]ost Arabs were in Bouazizi’s shopless position”⁽²⁶⁾. The act of self-sacrifice has also unveiled Bouazizi’s dignity that had been trampled over by the unscrupulous and coercive police. Such offense to dignity was, too, reported as another plight he shared with peers across the region. His death “resonated with millions of impoverished Arabs, including Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis, and Syrians, who related to his desperation, humiliation, and pride, as well as his humble background,” as Fawaz A. Gerges, author and Professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations, put it⁽²⁷⁾. It is important to underline, in this connection, that the MENA “uprisings” Bouazizi’s brutal act sparked “were quickly termed ‘revolutions’”⁽²⁸⁾.

In fact, the treatment of Bouazizi’s tragic act as the embodiment of an entire region agonizing socioeconomically clashes with, then, a well documented reality. This was the healthy economic situation of the MENA prior to being popularly shaken⁽²⁹⁾. Weighed against Bouazizi’s immolation and the grievances it symbolized, such a fact was visibly less covered and/or addressed while illuminating the fountainhead of the Arab protests. What explains popular wrath whilst the MENA countries were economically well-conditioned is too pronounced in the case of both Egypt and Tunisia. It was the unfair distribution of wealth and its exploitation by the few, failing, thus; to reach the masses to live up to their economic expectations in particular. Definitely, “six years” before the MENA hubbub, Egypt experienced an “economic boom” which “widened the gap between the poorest and richest and put the middle class in an economic cramp”⁽³⁰⁾. Likewise, “the overall economic situation in Tunisia has improved in the last decades.” However, “regional disparities have widened, with the south/west of the country excluded from the benefits of sustained growth”⁽³¹⁾.

With Bouazizi’s self-immolation mirroring, according to academia, the plight of an entire region that was rather economically sound, scholars and commentators were, to a great extent, unanimous on the causes of the MENA uprisings. As it is not a moot point, the oft repeated reasons adduced while demystifying the “Arab Spring” included: blatant economic inequalities, and thus; pauperization of the masses due to the manipulation of the economy by the ruler and his entourage; high unemployment rates prompting feelings of desperation, frustration and isolation among university graduates in particular; rampant corruption; violation of fundamental human rights and liberties by the repressive regimes; favoritism; resolve to restore dignity⁽³²⁾, and the new generation’s repressed political aspirations because of the ruler’s stranglehold on political power, with Libya and Egypt foregrounded as the two countries wherein the intent to set up a ‘dynastic’ presidency was too visible⁽³³⁾.

It is noteworthy that Bouazizi’s self-immolation which echoed the socio-economic woes of the MENA grassroots coupled with their desecrated dignity on the one hand, and the healthy economy of the entire region, on the other, are a perfect match within the revolutionary context. To redress the frail rendition of the MENA fountainhead in the western treatises examined, they precisely bring into view Robert Gurr’s ‘relative deprivation.’ In more naked terms, the MENA populace expected natural betterment of their standards of living as the region’s economies were doing well. Because of their dictator’s insatiable greed, however, all hopes for a decent life were dashed. A gap between what they thought they rightfully had to get and what they really received ensued, accordingly. The unfulfilled expectations, in a word, occasioned popular discontent in the form of the “Arab Spring.”

The MENA situation, it has to be stressed, was further aggravated as ‘relative deprivation’ was accompanied by an increasing rate of youth resulting from the region’s population growth. There was, in other words, a “youth bulge” aged between 15-29⁽³⁴⁾, roughly the cohort that Goldstone exposed in his theory as most prone to dissent. Making up the majority of the MENA citizenry, this population of youngsters has been on the rise since the 1990s. Their youths’ crunch time was rooted in scarcity of jobs and opportunities, a predicament that

faced mainly university graduates⁽³⁵⁾. Such MENA plight, put differently, explains why “Bread, freedom, social justice, and human dignity (al karama) were the rallying cries that echoed from mayadeen al-tahrir (liberation squares) in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Syria, and elsewhere”⁽³⁶⁾. Those slogans went hand in hand with another “common refrain heard everywhere from Yemen to Egypt, Syria to Bahrain – the people want the fall of the regime”⁽³⁷⁾.

As evinced theoretically, popular grievances and uprisings lack the puissance to unseat regimes. They can transmute, however, into a destabilizing force only when the elites join forces. An apposite question, in this regard, invites itself. What did the vanguard contribute to the MENA uprisings so that the term ‘revolutions’ was ascribed to the crises and was predominant in the western narrative? As clearly shown in the following sample of comments drawn from authoritative academic and journalistic writings, the answer to the query is zero contribution as the intellectual vanguard was noticeably absent.

2-2-The Leaderless Revolutions:

Addressed individually or lumped together, scholars and commentators were visibly united on the leaderless nature of the alleged MENA revolutions. “In the Tunisian case the youth cyberprotest and street demonstrations were marked by the absence of any leader, association, or political figure or party as a distant top-down leadership,” as Marzouki et al. put it⁽³⁸⁾. The Tunisian uprising, put differently, was “leaderless in the classic sense – there was no longstanding revolutionary figurehead, traditional opposition leader, or charismatic speechmaker to radicalize the public,” as pressed by the *Journal of Democracy*⁽³⁹⁾. In Egypt, likewise, the so-called revolution was also said to be “leaderless”⁽⁴⁰⁾. It goes without saying that the absence of a clear leader or leaders during the revolutionary process is tantamount to the nonexistence of a road map, the sine qua non of transition to a new period.

The Algerian author Ahmed Bensaada, in that vein, underscored the absence of ideological change characterizing the Arab crises, a remark which alludes, too, to the lack of leadership⁽⁴¹⁾. Definitely, “One of the most remarkable features of the uprisings that swept the Arab world was the absence of political parties, Islamist movements and established civil society organizations from the ranks of those protesting against incumbent regimes,” as Vincent Durac, Associate Professor in the Middle East Politics, observed. “From the earliest phases of the protest movements in Tunisia and elsewhere across the region, commentators noted their amorphous nature – youth-led, non-ideological, horizontal, [and] leaderless movements,” Durac further asseverated⁽⁴²⁾.

2-3- The Outcome:

Such well-established lack of revolutionary vision which translates into a lack of sudden, drastic change, a key component of a revolution, explains why “in many of these countries the emerging alternatives to deposed dictators are not very different or alternative”⁽⁴³⁾. The following discussion which inspects the outcome of the alleged revolutions in both Egypt and Tunisia supports the latter remark while bringing out its pertinence.

2-3-1- Egypt: The Grim Cycle of Totalitarianism

In the case of Egypt, the absence of rapid, radical transformation was too pronounced. After ousting Mubarak⁽⁴⁴⁾, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) took over the reins of government for a transitional period. SCAF, it is noteworthy, was nothing but “a Mubarak holdover”⁽⁴⁵⁾, or a miniature of the evinced regime. This is obvious from its membership, a group of army generals who were close to the deposed president as they worked with him for years⁽⁴⁶⁾. The alleged revolution, in other words, culminated in changing the leadership, but definitely not the regime which remained authoritarian⁽⁴⁷⁾. This explains why some scholars perceived the January 25, 2011 uprisings as “a soft military coup”⁽⁴⁸⁾ or “a coup in the guise of democracy”⁽⁴⁹⁾. The perception is, indeed, legally bolstered. When the office of President falls vacant for specific reasons, the position of interim president goes to the President of the Lower House of Parliament, not SCAF, as stipulated by the 1971 Egyptian Constitution⁽⁵⁰⁾.

That the Egyptian uprisings looked more like a coup than a revolution is further corroborated by SCAF's anti-revolution conduct in the post-Mubarak Egypt.

Instead of responding to popular clamor for change, SCAF, with a view to preserving the privileges of the military, "tried to dominate the constitution-making process"⁽⁵¹⁾. Once in power, thus, the council unilaterally appointed an unrepresentative committee to amend seven articles of the 1971 constitution which received, on March 19, 2011, wide popular consent. Yet, on March 30, it repealed Egypt's constitution and issued, in another unilateral move, an Interim Constitutional Declaration to legally guide the country during the interregnum⁽⁵²⁾. The declaration, an interim constitution, concentrated legislative and executive powers into the hands of SCAF, tightening, accordingly, its control on the other two key state's institutions until elections would be held⁽⁵³⁾. In June, it added amendments to the declaration thanks to which it "aimed to maintain its presence as a supra-governmental body even after the election of a new president"⁽⁵⁴⁾. To this end, it secured the military unbridled constitutional powers. It granted the institution from which it hails full power to oversee its own affairs. Besides curtailing the powers of the coming president, it arrogated to itself the right to wield leverage on the drafting of the new constitution⁽⁵⁵⁾.

In that quest to maintain its grip on power, SCAF reneged on "its promises to serve as a short-term caretaker government"⁽⁵⁶⁾ to become a gross violator of human rights. Under its 18-month leadership, to take some examples, civilians were prosecuted in military courts where stringent verdicts were delivered, and the right to appeal and defense denied. Of note, these prosecutions which amounted to virtually 12,000 far exceeded the number of civilian cases tried militarily during the 30-year rule of Hosni Mubarak. It even used lethal force, its military police, to quell the youth movements, causing several massacres, such as the massacres of Maspero, and the Port Said Stadium. Under the pretext of being a threat to economy, national security and order, heavy fines and imprisonment were other repressive measures included in the laws it enacted to criminalize all forms of protests, mainly labor strikes⁽⁵⁷⁾. Despite promises to annul the state of emergency law when seizing power, it widened the scope of its application⁽⁵⁸⁾.

Change in Egypt failed to unfold even when Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) leader, became the country's first democratically elected president in June 2012. Just like his predecessor SCAF, Morsi acted unilaterally to monopolize the state's institutions. Waiting for a new constitution to be adopted, he thus issued, on November 22, 2012, the constitutional declaration through which he granted himself overwhelming powers while insulating his decisions from judicial supervision⁽⁵⁹⁾. The declaration was "[t]he clearest signs of Morsi's authoritarian imposition which marked the return to Mubarak-style presidency without even the legal cosmetics that the previous regime employed to justify its authoritarian ways," as Gamal M. Selim, Assistant Professor of Political Science, contended. "At the core of the new authoritarianism lay the practice of the "Brotherhoodization" of the state (Akhwanat al-Dawla), according to which brotherhood members replaced former . . . officials on key posts as ministers, governors, and heads of governmental organizations, while any dissenters were marginalized or co-opted," as Selim further illuminated⁽⁶⁰⁾. 'Akhwanat al-dawla' was also seen in the intent of the Muslim Brotherhood to inject their ideology into the new constitution. This is said as the constituent assembly, the body tasked with writing the new constitution, was characterized by an Islamist-dominated membership⁽⁶¹⁾. Indeed, in December 2012 and after a referendum, Morsi signed into law the "controversial Islamist-backed constitution," as France 24 put it⁽⁶²⁾.

Besides the foregoing constitutional manipulations, Morsi's iron fist-rule was also reflected in Egyptians' human rights which were, like during SCAF's days, crushed despite initial pledges to democratize the country. In this vein, freedoms of expression and assembly as well as religious liberties were assaulted. Harassment of political and labor activists persisted as did the ruthless suppression of both political and social protests. Torture and mistreatment in police stations stepped up. Muslim Brotherhood's supporters were given carte

blanche to use violence which included torture and even killing when reacting to their opponents⁽⁶³⁾. These were indeed just some examples taken from a litany of human rights transgressions committed by former President Morsi in his endeavour to maintain an iron grip on Egypt. They definitely added to the economic situation which did not improve as the Brotherhood-led government allowed the neoliberal policies, the source of Egyptians' immiseration, to endure⁽⁶⁴⁾.

In July 2013, Morsi, just like Mubarak, was overthrown ensuing a military coup led by Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, then the army's top general. Galvanized by nationwide popular calls to end another authoritarian regime⁽⁶⁵⁾, this second regime change brought Egyptians back to square one. Instead of progressing, thus, post-Mubarak Egypt kept regressing on all fronts. Al-Sisi who ascended to the presidency in June 2014 also quenched popular hope for a new Egypt. Definitely, three years after the Arab Spring's outburst, the roots of the 25 January uprisings, mainly the socio-economic grievances, were still vivid. As reported by BBC, Al-Sisi's promises to redress the economy came to naught. During his first term, the living standards declined, and Egyptians' spending power deteriorated because of Egypt's depreciated currency⁽⁶⁶⁾. Youth unemployment, in addition, remained an unsolved mystery⁽⁶⁷⁾.

Equally important, al-Sisi met popular demand for dignity restoration during his two terms in office with an abysmal track record of human rights abuses. His first four-year term was characterized by "the worst deterioration of human rights . . . over the last several decades," as highlighted by The World⁽⁶⁸⁾. In its World Report 2018, Human Rights Watch underscored, when expatiating upon the Egyptians' rights situation for the year 2017, a raft of violations by al-Sisi's regime. To cite a few instances, the regime persisted in referring civilians charged with political dissent, whether violent or peaceful, to military courts. It also continued the policy of banning and penalizing peaceful gatherings. Granted impunity, the security forces were involved in scores of arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, and torture⁽⁶⁹⁾.

In its World Report 2019, the same organization put stress on the exacerbation of human rights crisis for the year 2018, the first year in al-Sisi's second term in office. Resulting from a rigged election, as the organization argued, this term was characterized by further erosion of human rights. In this connection, arrests, violence and intimidation to muzzle criticism of the government escalated. Crackdown on freedom of speech, violations of Egyptians' privacy, imprisonment of online activists, and media censorship without writs were all legitimized. The increasing number of executions and death sentences, as the same report noted, placed Egypt among the top ten nations in the world infamous for such practices in 2017⁽⁷⁰⁾. These were, indeed, just a few examples out of many.

With the political scene purged of opposition thanks to the aforesaid repressive measures, al-Sisi pushed for constitutional amendments, in 2019, to elongate his tenure and solidify his power grab, a move that has all the contours of a dictatorship. As reported by ALJAZEERA, the amendments to the 2014 constitution, which won sweeping popular blessing in a referendum in April 2019, extended his current term to six years and added a third one, leaving him in office until 2030, accordingly. Among other things, the changes also granted him jurisdiction over the judiciary by entrusting him with the appointment of senior judges. Equally important, they assigned the military a political role⁽⁷¹⁾. African Arguments, a pan-African platform for news, investigation and opinion, warned against the repercussions of the military's political sway. By making it the guardian of the constitution and democracy, precisely, the amendments render legitimate a coup against an elected government. Moreover, they give the institution free rein to step in politically⁽⁷²⁾. This could be done, one has to add, under the pretext of thwarting threats, whether they are authentic or not. Such military omnipotence also translates into a potent tool against dissent.

Al-Sisi's curbs on Egyptians' basic rights together with the constitutional amendments that made both the executive and the military supreme are obvious signs of "the institutionalization of authoritarianism in a bid to secure his rule"⁽⁷³⁾. Ironically, therefore, when the masses took to the streets to get rid of a strongman, their uprising boomeranged,

bringing to power a much stronger strongman. Compared to Mubarak's "mild authoritarianism," however, "Sisi imposed a much tighter form of totalitarianism"⁽⁷⁴⁾. His regime, in other words, was "more dictatorial, [and] more stifling"⁽⁷⁵⁾. Such retrogression to autocracy seems to have just one explanation. As a form of government, dictatorship is so well entrenched that Egyptians, even when rising up, failed to unshackle themselves from its grip.

2-3-2- Tunisia: People's Endless Socio-Economic Agony Despite Democracy

Contrary to Egypt and the rest of the MENA countries, "Tunisia has been widely viewed as the only success story of the "Arab Spring" protests"⁽⁷⁶⁾. Compared to Egypt, the Tunisian uprisings ushered in a new era, politically. This was visible in its adoption, in 2014, of a new constitution which was said to measure up to those long-standing democracies as important human rights were enshrined. It was followed by successful parliamentary and presidential elections⁽⁷⁷⁾. Though radical, such transition to democracy proved to be not the panacea for the country's ailing economy. From 2014, the year Tunisia's profound political revamp materialized, to 2019, the year before it would, like the rest of the world, undergo the detrimental effects of COVID-19 pandemic on particularly its economy, the spectre of social instability continued to hang over the country. As it is clear in the following brief but pointed display of facts pertaining to the foregoing time frame, with a special focus on young Tunisians' predicament, the nation was plagued by yearly recurrent popular protests prodded by the unresolved socio-economic grievances. As opposed to politics, Tunisia failed, in other words, to make a rupture with the past economically. This in itself is enough to call its extolment as the sole success story into question.

In that vein, the youth's economic frustration which is rooted in unemployment, one of the key drivers of the 2010-2011 popular upheavals did not defuse in 2014 despite the political strides made. Then, young Tunisians were unable to achieve a measure of social justice as their struggle with economic marginalization, limited socio-economic opportunities, and unemployment persisted⁽⁷⁸⁾. The following year, the economic situation exacerbated. The tourism industry, a vital source of income and the country's economic pillar, was hit hard by terrorist attacks on the Bardo Museum and a Sousse beach resort, causing a spike in both poverty and unemployment⁽⁷⁹⁾. In 2016, Tunisia, again, failed to "tackle economic malaise, alienation and frustrations of North Africa youth"⁽⁸⁰⁾. Then, the increasing youth unemployment sparked violent protests which were viewed by France 24 as "the worst social unrest in the country since the 2011 revolution"⁽⁸¹⁾. The lack of jobs continued to inflame social agitation in the so-called post-revolution Tunisia. Six years after the alleged revolution, that is, in 2017, protests over the same pending issue pushed young people to vent their disillusionment in the streets. This outpouring of rage led Youssef Chahed, then Prime Minister, to formally acknowledge the failure of his government to address Tunisians' grievances that spawned the 2011 protests, as ALJAZEERA revealed⁽⁸²⁾.

The adoption of austerity measures in 2018 further tightened the noose around Tunisians. Fuelled by the inability of the country to recover from the 2015 terrorist attacks, the measures foisted tax increases on some basic consumption goods and services, prompting, therefore, a wave of violent anti-austerity protests⁽⁸³⁾. Seven years following the uprisings, in other words, "the economy remain[ed] wracked by corruption and clientelist networks"⁽⁸⁴⁾. This explains why "the protesters' economic demands remain[ed] unaddressed and many economic indicators have gotten worse"⁽⁸⁵⁾. In 2019, "Tunisians anger at the high cost of living, unemployment and decline of state services since the overthrow of Zine El-Abidine" was still intense⁽⁸⁶⁾. It has to be underscored, in this context, that post-Ben Ali leadership failed to resolve Tunisians' grievances even though, politically, the country went through ten government changes from 2011 to 2019⁽⁸⁷⁾. These many reshuffles, definitely, lay bare two key realities that speak for themselves.

First, Tunisia never developed, either prior to or after its purported revolution, a viable economic program to respond to its citizens' unremitting SOS for a decent life. The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace attributed Tunisia's persistent economic troubles to the

inability of post-uprising leadership to introduce essential reforms and adopt comprehensive policies to rid the country of the root causes behind its citizens' outpouring of wrath in 2010-11. As the think tank revealed, no laws were enacted to fight corruption whose practice worsened since the alleged revolution. Moreover, as unemployment persisted and even skyrocketed, it drew an increasing number of youngsters to the informal sector which, indeed, deprived the state of significant tax revenues. Unsettled, regional disparities widened. As the economic activity is concentrated in the coastal region, public investment continued to benefit this region at the expense of the country's hinterlands which remained undeveloped, suffering, accordingly, from an enduring lack of social justice, high unemployment and widespread poverty⁽⁸⁸⁾. Clearly, despite a shift to a new system of governance and many cabinet turnovers, Tunisia did not succeed to dispense with the economic policies of the Ben Ali regime.

Second, Tunisia's transition to democracy, one has to asseverate, is undoubtedly not the effective antidote to its struggling economy. This is bolstered by two facts. First, democracy did not pay economic dividends, according to the previous exposition of facts between 2014 and 2019. Second, instead of galvanizing some socio-economic headway, the political makeover caused regress as the nation faced new challenges and threats. Besides making social unrest chronic in post-Ben Ali era, persistent economic precarity, it is noteworthy, plunged the country into further troubles. With a faltering economy, therefore, the inability of the new leadership to bring to fruition, particularly, young people's socio-economic aspirations gave, alarmingly, impetus to the rise of brain drain and clandestine migration.

Between 2011 and 2017, precisely, tens of thousands of highly educated and thus qualified workers headed to Europe, the Gulf, and Canada where higher wages and better living conditions were alluring. Aged between 25 and 35 are the ones who fled, including architects, doctors, academics, and engineers. The push factors, ironically, echoed the same root causes triggering the Tunisian upheaval, namely lack of both tangible change and improvement in the living standards, hopelessness, in addition to joblessness which soared during the aforementioned period⁽⁸⁹⁾. As university education is subsidized by the government, the relocation translates into a loss of valuable human capital which dealt a heavy blow to an economy already ailing⁽⁹⁰⁾. Moreover, youngsters' dashed hopes for better living conditions fed their disillusionment which prompted, in 2018, a new wave of illegal migration. Chasing a job and a brighter life, then, more than 3,300 Tunisians landed in Italy, risking their lives on rudimentary' boats⁽⁹¹⁾. With such a number, "Tunisia . . . overtook Eritrea as the country with the largest number of migrants entering Italy by sea"⁽⁹²⁾.

Rather than ushering in a new era assuring welfare to Tunisians, the so-called revolution, more importantly, placed Tunisia under a ticking time bomb. Besides unrelenting socioeconomic frustration, the country wrestled with new security threats. Precisely, the deterioration of the security situation arose from radical jihadist ideology that would be appealing to many desperate youngsters. After decades of repression under the rule of both former presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, the fall of the latter's regime gave a new lease of life to radicalization. Then, amnesty was extended to jihadists who would trade on the poor economic situation of the post-2011 period to spread their ideology. In this regard, Ansar al-Sharia Tunisia was the most influential jihadist group in post-Ben Ali Tunisia. To promote Sharia law across the country, the group embarked on a proselytizing mission which relied on providing social service, such as food and medical care, to people living in the country's marginalized regions, notably the country's interior, west and south. Such assistance proved to be very effective as it struck a chord among mainly young Tunisians still victims of the same economic alienation underlying Bouazizi's self-immolation. By offering money and making promises, the group, thus, became home to those disillusioned youngsters who fell prey to its radical ideology⁽⁹³⁾. Since 2011, radicalization took hold of the country, turning it into "one of the top exporters of Salafi jihadist fighters, with more than 5,500 Tunisians fighting with jihadist groups in Iraq, Libya, Mali, Syria, and Yemen as estimated by the UN in 2015"⁽⁹⁴⁾.

Tunisia's democratic transition is undeniably a significant political gain. However, it is arguably not Tunisians' long-awaited change as their call for a new dawn was apolitical. In this respect, it is important to remind that popular demands in the MENA countries shaken by uprisings, crystal clear in the banners waved, were uniform. As has been unveiled previously, the masses in Tunisia and throughout the region clamoured for 'bread', 'social justice', 'freedom' and 'human dignity'. Whilst bread evokes a pay and thus a job, social justice stands for fair and equal distribution of wealth, opportunities, and social privileges⁽⁹⁵⁾. Devoid of political dimension the freedom cry "means freedom from oppression, exploitation, corruption and a servile existence"⁽⁹⁶⁾. The MENA protesters also pursued the removal of their hard-handed rulers, without yearning, it has to be underscored, for a specific form of governance. In this sense, and based on the foregoing discussion, the West's treatment of Tunisia as a success story becomes an exaggeration, at best.

Conclusion:

The article set out to disconfirm the treatment, in the western narrative precisely, of the 2010-11 MENA crises as revolutions. With a special focus on Egypt and Tunisia whose dictatorial regimes were toppled, the "Arab Spring" was thus put to the 'revolution' test. The objective was to bring into view failure of the two countries to pass such test. Indeed, a set of root causes shared among the recalcitrant MENA countries was revealed. The fury of the MENA masses, based on the 'revolution lexicon', was precisely whipped up by 'relative deprivation' which intensified in the presence of a 'youth bulge' whose plight lay mainly in the exiguousness of jobs. Popular wrath and its genesis, however, cannot result in a revolution unless they amalgamate necessarily with another ingredient, the elite. Inquisition into the role played by the latter, in this connection, laid bare the leaderless character of the uprisings which was well documented. As the vanguard is, according to the 'theory of revolution', the instigator of radical change, its absence, the discussion concluded, was commensurate with failure to break with the past, and hence; to transition to a new period. The revolution test result, in other words, turned out to be negative. Yet, to lend credence to the conclusion, further scrutiny into Egypt and Tunisia as case studies gave prominence to the outcome of the purported revolutions.

In Egypt, as the analysis demonstrated, the same repressive environment that pushed Egyptians to clamour for the pharaoh's ouster persisted when SCAF, Mohamed Morsi, and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi successively took power. More importantly, the constitutional amendments that al-Sisi introduced during his second term to tighten his grip on power lifted the veil on a reality: despotism is so well entrenched a tradition in Egypt's political legacy that it is impossible to obliterate. As arguably shown, the amendments did not only consolidate, but, alarmingly, plunged Egypt further into totalitarianism as al-Sisi's autocratic rule transcended Mubarak's. This reversion to dictatorship that was accompanied, as conclusively evidenced, with erosion of Egyptians' rights in post-Mubarak era cannot be qualified as a revolution.

In Tunisia, a new era unfolded as democracy superseded dictatorship. Although drastic, this political transmutation is, too, not worthy of the label revolution because it did not avert social instability which was caused by economic troubles that perdured despite regime change. As dissection brought to light, democracy, above all, failed to live up to Tunisians' expectations, especially the youth's, for better living standards, a key demand fuelling popular strident calls for Ben Ali's ouster. Unresolved, popular grievances had detrimental effects on post-Ben Ali Tunisia. They did not only throw the country into a cycle of social turmoil whose flames were fanned by repeated protests, but they also caused new challenges which were sparked by mounting disgruntlement among youngsters in particular. Besides brain drain and illegal immigration, socioeconomic frustration set the stage for radicalization, adding, as a result, security threats to a nation that kept struggling economically. To further debunk the laudation of the uprisings as a successful story, that is, as a successful revolution, attention was drawn to two realities pertaining to democracy. On the one hand, it has been

arguably exposed that this system of governance has never been a popular call. On the other, the same system displayed its impotence in the face of citizens' socioeconomic demands, that is, its shortcomings to induce a new dawn, as the country remained entrapped, economically, in Ben Ali's policies.

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