Understanding the Revolutions of 2011 Weakness and Resilience in Middle Eastern Autocracies

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The wave of revolutions sweeping the Middle East bears a striking resemblance to previous political earthquakes. As in Europe in 1848, rising food prices and high unemployment have fueled popular protests from Morocco to Oman. As in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in 1989, frustration with closed, corrupt, and unresponsive political systems has led to defections among elites and the fall of once powerful regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, and perhaps Libya. Yet 1848 and 1989 are not the right analogies for this past winter’s events. The revolutions of 1848 sought to overturn traditional monarchies, and those in 1989 were aimed at toppling communist governments. The revolutions of 2011 are fighting something quite different: “sultanistic” dictatorships. Although such regimes often appear unshakable, they are actually highly vulnerable, because the very strategies they use to stay in power make them brittle, not resilient.

It is no coincidence that although popular protests have shaken much of the Middle East, the only revolutions to succeed so far—those in Tunisia and Egypt—have been against modern sultans.

For a revolution to succeed, a number of factors have to come together. The government must appear so irremediably unjust or inept that it is widely viewed as a threat to the country’s future; elites (especially in the military) must be alienated from the state and no longer willing to defend it; a broad-based section of the population, spanning ethnic and religious groups and socioeconomic classes, must mobilize; and international powers must either refuse to step in to defend the government or constrain it from using maximum force to defend itself.

Revolutions rarely triumph because these conditions rarely coincide. This is especially the case in traditional monarchies and one-party states, whose leaders often manage to maintain popular support by making appeals to respect for royal tradition or nationalism. Elites, who are often enriched by such governments, will only forsake them if their circumstances or the ideology of the rulers changes drastically. And in almost all cases, broad-based popular mobilization is difficult to achieve because it requires bridging the disparate interests of the urban and rural poor, the middle class, students, professionals, and different ethnic or religious groups. History is replete with student movements, workers’ strikes, and peasant uprisings that were readily put down because they remained a revolt of one group, rather than of broad coalitions. Finally, other countries have often intervened to prop up embattled rulers in order to stabilize the international system.

Yet there is another kind of dictatorship that often proves much more vulnerable, rarely retaining power for more than a generation: the sultanistic regime. Such governments arise when a national leader expands his personal power at the expense of formal institutions. Sultanistic dictators appeal to no ideology and have no purpose other than maintaining their personal authority. They may preserve some of the formal aspects of democracy—elections, political parties, a national assembly, or a constitution—but they rule above them by installing compliant supporters in key positions and sometimes by declaring states of emergency, which they justify by appealing to fears of external (or internal) enemies.
Behind the scenes, such dictators generally amass great wealth, which they use to buy the loyalty of supporters and punish opponents. Because they need resources to fuel their patronage machine, they typically promote economic development, through industrialization, commodity exports, and education. They also seek relationships with foreign countries, promising stability in exchange for aid and investment. However wealth comes into the country, most of it is funneled to the sultan and his cronies.

The new sultans control their countries’ military elites by keeping them divided. Typically, the security forces are separated into several commands (army, air force, police, intelligence)—each of which reports directly to the leader. The leader monopolizes contact between the commands, between the military and civilians, and with foreign governments, a practice that makes sultans essential for both coordinating the security forces and channeling foreign aid and investment. To reinforce fears that foreign aid and political coordination would disappear in their absence, sultans typically avoid appointing possible successors.

To keep the masses depoliticized and unorganized, sultans control elections and political parties and pay their populations off with subsidies for key goods, such as electricity, gasoline, and foodstuffs. When combined with surveillance, media control, and intimidation, these efforts generally ensure that citizens stay disconnected and passive.

By following this pattern, politically adept sultans around the world have managed to accumulate vast wealth and high concentrations of power. Among the most famous in recent history were Mexico’s Porfirio Díaz, Iran’s Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Nicaragua’s Somoza dynasty, Haiti’s Duvalier dynasty, the Philippines’ Ferdinand Marcos, and Indonesia’s Suharto.

But as those sultans all learned, and as the new generation of sultans in the Middle East—including Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Omar al-Bashir in Sudan, Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen—has discovered, power that is too concentrated can be difficult to hold on to.

**PAPER TIGERS**

For all their attempts to prop themselves up, sultanistic dictatorships have inherent vulnerabilities that only increase over time. Sultans must strike a careful balance between self-enrichment and rewarding the elite: if the ruler rewards himself and neglects the elite, a key incentive for the elite to support the regime is removed. But as sultans come to feel more entrenched and indispensable, their corruption frequently becomes more brazen and concentrated among a small inner circle. As the sultan monopolizes foreign aid and investment or gets too close to unpopular foreign governments, he may alienate elite and popular groups even further.

Meanwhile, as the economy grows and education expands under a sultanistic dictator, the number of people with higher aspirations and a keener sensitivity to the intrusions of police surveillance and abuse increases. And if the entire population grows rapidly while the lion’s share of economic gains is hoarded by the elite, inequality and unemployment surge as well. As the costs of subsidies and other programs the regime uses to appease citizens rise, keeping the masses depoliticized places even more stress on the regime. If protests start, sultans may offer
reforms or expand patronage benefits—as Marcos did in the Philippines in 1984 to head off escalating public anger. Yet as Marcos learned in 1986, these sops are generally ineffective once people have begun to clamor for ending the sultan’s rule.

The weaknesses of sultanistic regimes are magnified as the leader ages and the question of succession becomes more acute. Sultanistic rulers have sometimes been able to hand over leadership to younger family members. This is only possible when the government has been operating effectively and has maintained elite support (as in Syria in 2000, when President Hafez al-Assad handed power to his son Bashar) or if another country backs the regime (as in Iran in 1941, when Western governments promoted the succession from Reza Shah to his son Mohammad Reza Pahlavi). If the regime’s corruption has already alienated the country’s elites, they may turn on it and try to block a dynastic succession, seeking to regain control of the state (which is what happened in Indonesia in the late 1990s, when the Asian financial crisis dealt a blow to Suharto’s patronage machine).

The very indispensability of the sultan also works against a smooth transfer of power. Most of the ministers and other high officials are too deeply identified with the chief executive to survive his fall from power. For example, the shah’s 1978 attempt to avoid revolution by substituting his prime minister, Shahpur Bakhtiar, for himself as head of government did not work; the entire regime fell the next year. Ultimately, such moves satisfy neither the demands of the mobilized masses seeking major economic and political change nor the aspirations of the urban and professional class that has taken to the streets to demand inclusion in the control of the state.

Then there are the security forces. By dividing their command structure, the sultan may reduce the threat they pose. But this strategy also makes the security forces more prone to defections in the event of mass protests. Lack of unity leads to splits within the security services; meanwhile, the fact that the regime is not backed by any appealing ideology or by independent institutions ensures that the military has less motivation to put down protests. Much of the military may decide that the country’s interests are better served by regime change. If part of the armed forces defects—as happened under Díaz, the shah of Iran, Marcos, and Suharto—the government can unravel with astonishing rapidity. In the end, the befuddled ruler, still convinced of his indispensability and invulnerability, suddenly finds himself isolated and powerless.

The degree of a sultan’s weakness is often visible only in retrospect. Although it is easy to identify states with high levels of corruption, unemployment, and personalist rule, the extent to which elites oppose the regime and the likelihood that the military will defect often become apparent only once large-scale protests have begun. After all, the elite and military officers have every reason to hide their true feelings until a crucial moment arises, and it is impossible to know which provocation will lead to mass, rather than local, mobilization. The rapid unraveling of sultanistic regimes thus often comes as a shock.

In some cases, of course, the military does not immediately defect in the face of rebellion. In Nicaragua in the early 1970s, for example, Anastasio Somoza Debayle was able to use loyal troops in Nicaragua’s National Guard to put down the rebellion against him. But even when the regime can draw on loyal sectors of the military, it rarely manages to survive. It simply breaks down at a slower pace, with significant bloodshed or even civil war resulting along the way.
Somoza’s success in 1975 was short-lived; his increasing brutality and corruption brought about an even larger rebellion in the years that followed. After some pitched battles, even formerly loyal troops began to desert, and Somoza fled the country in 1979.

International pressure can also turn the tide. The final blow to Marcos’ rule was the complete withdrawal of U.S. support after Marcos dubiously claimed victory in the presidential election held in 1986. When the United States turned away from the regime, his remaining supporters folded, and the nonviolent People Power Revolution forced him into exile.

ROCK THE CASBAH

The revolutions unfolding across the Middle East represent the breakdown of increasingly corrupt sultanistic regimes. Although economies across the region have grown in recent years, the gains have bypassed the majority of the population, being amassed instead by a wealthy few. Mubarak and his family reportedly built up a fortune of between $40 billion and $70 billion, and 39 officials and businessmen close to Mubarak’s son Gamal are alleged to have made fortunes averaging more than $1 billion each. In Tunisia, a 2008 U.S. diplomatic cable released by the whistleblower Web site WikiLeaks noted a spike in corruption, warning that Ben Ali’s family was becoming so predatory that new investment and job creation were being stifled and that his family’s ostentation was provoking widespread outrage.

Fast-growing and urbanizing populations in the Middle East have been hurt by low wages and by food prices that rose by 32 percent in the last year alone, according to the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization. But it is not simply such rising prices, or a lack of growth, that fuels revolutions; it is the persistence of widespread and unrelieved poverty amid increasingly extravagant wealth.

Discontent has also been stoked by high unemployment, which has stemmed in part from the surge in the Arab world’s young population. The percentage of young adults—those aged 15-29 as a fraction of all those over 15—ranges from 38 percent in Bahrain and Tunisia to over 50 percent in Yemen (compared to 26 percent in the United States). Not only is the proportion of young people in the Middle East extraordinarily high, but their numbers have grown quickly over a short period of time. Since 1990, youth population aged 15-29 has grown by 50 percent in Libya and Tunisia, 65 percent in Egypt, and 125 percent in Yemen.

Thanks to the modernization policies of their sultanistic governments, many of these young people have been able to go to university, especially in recent years. Indeed, college enrollment has soared across the region in recent decades, more than tripling in Tunisia, quadrupling in Egypt, and expanding tenfold in Libya.

It would be difficult, if not impossible, for any government to create enough jobs to keep pace. For the sultanistic regimes, the problem has been especially difficult to manage. As part of their patronage strategies, Ben Ali and Mubarak had long provided state subsidies to workers and families through such programs as Tunisia’s National Employment Fund— which trained workers, created jobs, and issued loans—and Egypt’s policy of guaranteeing job placement for college graduates. But these safety nets were phased out in the last decade to reduce expenditures.
Vocational training, moreover, was weak, and access to public and many private jobs was tightly controlled by those connected to the regime. This led to incredibly high youth unemployment across the Middle East: the figure for the region hit 23 percent, or twice the global average, in 2009. Unemployment among the educated, moreover, has been even worse: in Egypt, college graduates are ten times as likely to have no job as those with only an elementary school education.

In many developing economies, the informal sector provides an outlet for the unemployed. Yet the sultans in the Middle East made even those activities difficult. After all, the protests were sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a 26-year-old Tunisian man who was unable to find formal work and whose fruit cart was confiscated by the police. Educated youth and workers in Tunisia and Egypt have been carrying out local protests and strikes for years to call attention to high unemployment, low wages, police harassment, and state corruption. This time, their protests combined and spread to other demographics.

These regimes’ concentration of wealth and brazen corruption increasingly offended their militaries. Ben Ali and Mubarak both came from the professional military; indeed, Egypt had been ruled by former officers since 1952. Yet in both countries, the military had seen its status eclipsed. Egypt’s military leaders controlled some local businesses, but they fiercely resented Gamal Mubarak, who was Hosni Mubarak’s heir apparent. As a banker, he preferred to build his influence through business and political cronies rather than through the military, and those connected to him gained huge profits from government monopolies and deals with foreign investors. In Tunisia, Ben Ali kept the military at arm’s length to ensure that it would not harbor political ambitions. Yet he let his wife and her relatives shake down Tunisian businessmen and build seaside mansions. In both countries, military resentments made the military less likely to crack down on mass protests; officers and soldiers would not kill their countrymen just to keep the Ben Ali and Mubarak families and their favorites in power.

A similar defection among factions of the Libyan military led to Qaddafi’s rapid loss of large territories. As of this writing, however, Qaddafi’s use of mercenaries and exploitation of tribal loyalties have prevented his fall. And in Yemen, Saleh has been kept afloat, if barely, by U.S. aid given in support of his opposition to Islamist terrorists and by the tribal and regional divisions among his opponents. Still, if the opposition unites, as it seems to be doing, and the United States becomes reluctant to back his increasingly repressive regime, Saleh could be the next sultan to topple.

THE REVOLUTIONS’ LIMITS

As of this writing, Sudan and Syria, the other sultanistic regions in the region, have not seen major popular protests. Yet Bashir’s corruption and the concentration of wealth in Khartoum have become brazen. One of the historic rationales for his regime-keeping the whole of Sudan under northern control-recently disappeared with southern Sudan’s January 2011 vote in favor of independence. In Syria, Assad has so far retained nationalist support because of his hard-line policies toward Israel and Lebanon. He still maintains the massive state employment programs that have kept Syrians passive for decades, but he has no mass base of support and is dependent on a tiny elite, whose corruption is increasingly notorious. Although it is hard to say how staunch
the elite and military support for Bashir and Assad is, both regimes are probably even weaker than they appear and could quickly crumble in the face of broadbased protests.

The region’s monarchies are more likely to retain power. This is not because they face no calls for change. In fact, Morocco, Jordan, Oman, and the Persian Gulf kingdoms face the same demographic, educational, and economic challenges that the sultanistic regimes do, and they must reform to meet them. But the monarchies have one big advantage: their political structures are flexible. Modern monarchies can retain considerable executive power while ceding legislative power to elected parliaments. In times of unrest, crowds are more likely to protest for legislative change than for abandonment of the monarchy. This gives monarchs more room to maneuver to pacify the people. Facing protests in 1848, the monarchies in Germany and Italy, for example, extended their constitutions, reduced the absolute power of the king, and accepted elected legislatures as the price of avoiding further efforts at revolution.

In monarchies, moreover, succession can result in change and reform, rather than the destruction of the entire system. A dynastic succession is legitimate and may thus be welcomed rather than feared, as in a typical sultanistic state. For example, in Morocco in 1999, the public greeted King Mohammed VI’s ascension to the throne with great hopes for change. And in fact, Mohammed VI has investigated some of the regime’s previous legal abuses and worked to somewhat strengthen women’s rights. He has calmed recent protests in Morocco by promising major constitutional reforms. In Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, and Saudi Arabia, rulers will likely to be able to stay in office if they are willing to share their power with elected officials or hand the reins to a younger family member who heralds significant reforms.

The regime most likely to avoid significant change in the near term is Iran. Although Iran has been called a sultanistic regime, it is different in several respects: unlike any other regime in the region, the ayatollahs espouse an ideology of anti-Western Shiism and Persian nationalism that draws considerable support from ordinary people. This makes it more like a party-state with a mass base of support. Iran is also led by a combination of several strong leaders, not just one: Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Parliamentary Chair Ali Larijani. So there is no one corrupt or inefficient sultan on which to focus dissent. Finally, the Iranian regime enjoys the support of the Basij, an ideologically committed militia, and the Revolutionary Guards, which are deeply intertwined with the government. There is little chance that these forces will defect in the face of mass protests.

**AFTER THE REVOLUTIONS**

Those hoping for Tunisia and Egypt to make the transition to stable democracy quickly will likely be disappointed. Revolutions are just the beginning of a long process. Even after a peaceful revolution, it generally takes half a decade for any type of stable regime to consolidate. If a civil war or a counterrevolution arises (as appears to be happening in Libya), the reconstruction of the state takes still longer.

In general, after the post-revolutionary honeymoon period ends, divisions within the opposition start to surface. Although holding new elections is a straightforward step, election campaigns and then decisions taken by new legislatures will open debates over taxation and state spending.
corruption, foreign policy, the role of the military, the powers of the president, official policy on religious law and practice, minority rights, and so on. As conservatives, populists, Islamists, and modernizing reformers fiercely vie for power in Tunisia, Egypt, and perhaps Libya, those countries will likely face lengthy periods of abrupt government turnovers and policy reversals—similar to what occurred in the Philippines and many Eastern European countries after their revolutions.

Some Western governments, having long supported Ben Ali and Mubarak as bulwarks against a rising tide of radical Islam, now fear that Islamist groups are poised to take over. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt is the best organized of the opposition groups there, and so stands to gain in open elections, particularly if elections are held soon, before other parties are organized. Yet the historical record of revolutions in sultanistic regimes should somewhat alleviate such concerns. Not a single sultan overthrown in the last 30 years—including in Haiti, the Philippines, Romania, Zaire, Indonesia, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan—has been succeeded by an ideologically driven or radical government. Rather, in every case, the end product has been a flawed democracy—often corrupt and prone to authoritarian tendencies, but not aggressive or extremist.

This marks a significant shift in world history. Between 1949 and 1979, every revolution against a sultanistic regime—in China, Cuba, Vietnam, Cambodia, Iran, and Nicaragua—resulted in a communist or an Islamist government. At the time, most intellectuals in the developing world favored the communist model of revolution against capitalist states. And in Iran, the desire to avoid both capitalism and communism and the increasing popularity of traditional Shiite clerical authority resulted in a push for an Islamist government. Yet since the 1980s, neither the communist nor the Islamist model has had much appeal. Both are widely perceived as failures at producing economic growth and popular accountability—the two chief goals of all recent anti-sultanistic revolutions.

Noting that high unemployment spurred regime change, some in the United States have called for a Marshall Plan for the Middle East to stabilize the region. But in 1945, Europe had a history of prior democratic regimes and a devastated physical infrastructure that needed rebuilding. Tunisia and Egypt have intact economies with excellent recent growth records, but they need to build new democratic institutions. Pouring money into these countries before they have created accountable governments would only fuel corruption and undermine their progress toward democracy.

What is more, the United States and other Western nations have little credibility in the Middle East given their long support for sultanistic dictators. Any efforts to use aid to back certain groups or influence electoral outcomes are likely to arouse suspicion. What the revolutionaries need from outsiders is vocal support for the process of democracy, a willingness to accept all groups that play by democratic rules, and a positive response to any requests for technical assistance in institution building.

The greatest risk that Tunisia and Egypt now face is an attempt at counterrevolution by military conservatives, a group that has often sought to claim power after a sultan has been removed. This occurred in Mexico after Díaz was overthrown, in Haiti after Jean-Claude Duvalier’s departure, and in the Philippines after Marcos’ fall. And after Suharto was forced from power in Indonesia,
the military exerted its strength by cracking down on independence movements in East Timor, which Indonesia had occupied since 1975.

In the last few decades, attempted counterrevolutions (such as those in the Philippines in 1987-88 and Haiti in 2004) have largely fizzled out. They have not reversed democratic gains or driven post-sultanistic regimes into the arms of extremists-religious or otherwise.

However, such attempts weaken new democracies and distract them from undertaking much-needed reforms. They can also provoke a radical reaction. If Tunisia’s or Egypt’s military attempts to claim power or block Islamists from participating in the new regime, or the region’s monarchies seek to keep their regimes closed through repression rather than open them up via reforms, radical forces will only be strengthened. As one example, the opposition in Bahrain, which had been seeking constitutional reforms, has reacted to Saudi action to repress its protests by calling for the overthrow of Bahrain’s monarchy instead of its reform. Inclusiveness should be the order of the day.

The other main threat to democracies in the Middle East is war. Historically, revolutionary regimes have hardened and become more radical in response to international conflict. It was not the fall of the Bastille but war with Austria that gave the radical Jacobins power during the French Revolution. Similarly, it was Iran’s war with Iraq that gave Ayotallah Ruhollah Khomeini the opportunity to drive out Iran’s secular moderates. In fact, the one event that may cause radicals to hijack the Middle Eastern revolutions is if Israeli anxiety or Palestinian provocations escalate hostility between Egypt and Israel, leading to renewed war.

That said, there is still reason for optimism. Prior to 2011, the Middle East stood out on the map as the sole remaining region in the world virtually devoid of democracy. The Jasmine and Nile Revolutions look set to change all that. Whatever the final outcome, this much can be said: the rule of the sultans is coming to an end.

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