



# R | EVOLUTIONS

GLOBAL TRENDS & REGIONAL ISSUES

## Van den Bosch, J., “Introduction: The Colors and Seasons of the Revolutions,”

*R/evolutions: Global Trends & Regional Issues, Vol 4, No. 1, 2016, (ISSN: 2449-6413), pp. 12-18*



# INTRODUCTION:

The **COLORS** and **SEASONS** of the  
**REVOLUTIONS**

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BACK IN 2011 WHEN WESTERN MEDIA HAD TO LABEL THE SPREAD OF THE TUNISIAN PROTESTS TO NEIGHBORING COUNTRIES, THE TERM "ARAB SPRING" DID NOT YET CONTAIN SUCH A SEMANTIC MISMATCH WITH REALITY, AS IT DOES FROM TODAY'S PERSPECTIVE. IN ANALOGY WITH THE "AUTUMN OF NATIONS" OF 1989, WHICH ITSELF ALREADY RECYCLED THE "SPRING OF NATIONS" FROM 1848, THIS "SPRING" BROUGHT A SHORT-LIVED SEASON OF HOPE TO A REGION MOST DESERVING OF IT. EVEN WHEN THE LABEL IGNORES THE MANY PERSIANS AND TURKS THAT HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY THESE UPRISINGS.

As the semantic gap widened in light of repressive authoritarian reactions or full-fledged civil wars, the West started pondering on its naiveness and looking for other labels (Arab uprisings, revolutions, etc.). In any case, the "Arab Spring" stuck. While the hope for democratic transitions, which was real in 2011 – both in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) as in the West – in retrospective seems misplaced, it was actually in line with the feeling of relief that blew through the Soviet Union once

its peoples realized the Kremlin would no longer oppose their plight for freedom and nationhood. In contrast though, few post-Soviet transitions were violent, and most at least nominally clung to democratic values. (Full reversals would be posterior and more incremental.) Also, in MENA, there was more than the democratic genie that popped out of the bottle. The West initially ignored the Islamist sub-stream, but as sectarianism and conflict bloated their ranks, the Western-projected "spring" label became further and further removed from its autumnal reference point.

Nevertheless, to call the (failed) uprisings an 'Arab Winter' like some disillusioned observers is maybe more a sign of our betrayed collective hope than the labelling of a counter-reality. An authoritarian backlash was to be expected, and while the civil wars in Libya, Syria and Yemen are astonishing in their repercussions and level of complexity, it is still quite early to really discern the lasting impact of the Arab Spring, especially now when it's so clouded by the violence. As professor Mohammed Bamyeh stated: "successful revolutions always change the culture before they are able to change the political structure."<sup>1</sup> The same is true for the other revolutionary seasons of 1848 and 1989. In the words of Mark Almond:

"Both 1848-49 and the recent experience of the post-Communist revolutions suggest that the process of revolutionary change is not linear but filled with twists and turns. After 1848's sudden collapse of the old order, 1849 saw restorations, but they could not completely turn back the clock. Similarly, within a few years of 1989, old faces were back in high office across the ex-Soviet bloc but the planned economy was dead nonetheless."<sup>2</sup>

So how did the Arab Spring change the Middle East? That is the main question on which this issue of R/evolutions wants to zoom in. While the timeframe (more than five years) is short to make solid statements about the future of MENA, the authors in this edition take various approaches in order to ponder on what will be the shape of things to come.

Notwithstanding their heterogeneity it is possible to draw at least some parallels between the Arab Spring, the Autumn of Nations or the so-called color revolutions when it comes to the spontaneity of the protests. People do not go out on the streets en masse and occupy central public

<sup>1</sup> See article of M. Bamyeh in this edition.

<sup>2</sup> Almond 2012: 35-36.

places for sustained periods for any reason. Structural discrimination and socioeconomic grievances lie at the heart of all revolutions. Nonetheless, the states in which they occurred create very different opportunities and pathways for such protests. The international environment has had maybe even more impact: Beck & Hüser stress three regional differences that impede comparison between 1989 and 2011. Firstly, Arab countries have lower 'external' incentives for democratization. The conducting influence of the EU in Europe cannot be compared to the weak Arab League or local (failed) efforts to create any kind of 'pan-Arab' or even 'pan-Maghreb' transnational unity.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the socialist legacy is different:

“It should be noted that the region’s nationalist regimes (with some socialist paint), established in the 1950s, were an indigenous reaction to Western imperialism and colonialism, while socialism in Eastern Europe was externally imposed by the Soviet Union. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eastern European states were able to return to their economic and political heritage, which they shared with Western Europe, but the Arab world faces the challenge of having to redefine itself politically and economically.”<sup>4</sup>

Thirdly, the economic factors which can affect the development and consolidation of democratic institutions likewise diverge. The instability in the wake of the Arab Spring has deterred investors' confidence.<sup>5</sup> These connections or linkages between regions and with interfering regional or global great powers diversify their trajectories even further.

This might explain also why the Arab Spring has not spread further south from Northern Africa. Osman Antwi-Boateng explains why the domino effect spread throughout MENA but failed to do so in the southern direction even when the regions share many conditions, such as: a young population, high levels of (youth) unemployment, the challenge of dissident elites and general state crises. At first glance these structural driving forces should be conducive, but other factors such as a common language, a unified media (al-Jazeera), the widespread use of social and digital media, the culture of Pan-Arabism and even the 'Arab Street' protest culture seem to have contained the domino-effect solely to the MENA region.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Beck, Hüser 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Beck, Hüser 2012: 19-20.

<sup>5</sup> Beck, Hüser 2012, Sakbani 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Antwi-Boateng 2015.

Some enthusiastic observers heralded the 2011 demise of Blaise Compaoré and (almost) peaceful transition in Burkina Faso<sup>7</sup> as the start of the 'African Spring'.<sup>8</sup> This label, however, lacks depth and has been criticized,<sup>9</sup> as Africa cannot be represented by one country, and as a continent it has its own regions with their respective dynamics. More so, the label seems to forgo the post-Cold War paradigm shift that launched a continent-wide democratization wave throughout Africa. Paraphrasing the words of President Omar Bongo of Gabon: “The winds that shook the coconut trees came from the East”<sup>10</sup> and from this point one is left to wonder in what ways this democratization wave contributed to the Arab uprisings in Tunisia, Morocco and Libya. The 'African Spring' however has not taken hold for the aforementioned obvious reasons and – as a graphical proof – a quick google image search of the term will predominantly yield a beautiful color pallet of flowering African landscapes instead of pictures of urban mayhem and burned out cars.

This edition of R/evolutions is divided in three parts. *The Arab Spring in Perspective* contains two texts that provide an overview and the historical context to the Arab Uprisings. In his scientific essay, Dr. Abdellateef Al-Weshah outlines the main formative events of the Arab Spring and highlights their increasing complexity and interconnectedness. The article by Professor Malek Abisaab shows the demise of the Arab left since the 1970s and the dilemmas the movement faced in a globalizing world as these elites had to compete with various Islamist challengers to propose solutions to a growing range of problems.

<sup>7</sup> Despite the popular protests in Burkina Faso, a creeping coup by the Regiment of Presidential Security was the main player in the transition. Yacouba Isaac Zida was the coup leader and co-opted the opposition leaders, which had no choice if they wanted to avert violence. A later palace coup by a dissident subgroup of the regiment failed, allowing former elites from the Compaoré networks to reestablish their hold on power as their candidate won the subsequent elections.

<sup>8</sup> Glez 2015.

<sup>9</sup> Mantzikos 23-08-2012; Keita 21-11-2014; Maiotti 10-05-2015; Piet 09-10-2016.

<sup>10</sup> Nugent 2012: 376.

The second part, *Unraveling the Uprisings*, focuses on the Arab Spring itself by explaining the role of external actors and uncovering some underexplored dimensions. In an interview, Professor Amal Ghazal ponders on the spontaneous nature of the uprisings and how to untangle them from the actions of later actors (both domestic and foreign) that have alarmingly distorted the geopolitical map of MENA today. By comparing earlier revolutions in the region, Professor Mohammed A. Bamyeh zooms in on what could be called the “creative destruction” of the Arab Spring and provides an insightful glimpse of its transformative potential, which full effects can only be assessed by future analysts. Further, Professor miriam cooke presents an underexplored dimension of the Arab Spring in Syria, by presenting the struggle of Syrian activists and artists in its various forms. This part concludes with an interview with Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed, who sheds light on Saudi domestic politics and how the monarchy attempts to navigate their kingdom through the rocky waters of the Arab Spring.

The last part, *New Fault Lines & Legacies* will assess how MENA has been transformed by the Arab uprisings. The first article by Professor Raymond Hinnebusch explains the origins, drivers and impact of sectarianization in the region and lifts the veil of how this will continue to affect the region in the future. Professors Fethi Mansouri & Riccardo Armillei then concentrate on Tunisia, the only successful democratic transition in the region triggered by the Arab Spring. They evaluate which factors have made such change possible and highlight some of the pitfalls and challenges the consolidating democracy awaits. Together the texts in this edition provide an analytical purview on how intractable the region’s conflicts have become and how various (often contradictory) factors are coalescing along new geopolitical fault lines. That is why it will be so hard to determine the future of the MENA region in the years to come.

When the Arab Spring broke out in 2011, it came unexpected, just like the Autumn of Nations in 1989. While predicting the future is impossible, making comparisons, drawing parallels and establishing new theoretical frameworks can advance our understanding of what might come. Scholars need to let go of some standard theoretical reference points, and broaden their research agendas.<sup>11</sup> This edition of R/evolutions hopes to contribute to this effort by asking the question: What has changed in the Middle East and North Africa since 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Howard, Walters 2014.

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