

## **One year later, whither the Arab Spring? Domestic and regional challenges**

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In the previous issue of the SPSR, we asked a set of prominent scholars to discuss and revisit several of the key pillars of social movement theory. We did this in light of the events that led to the end of authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya and threatened several other regimes in the Maghreb and the Gulf. In this issue, written one year after the fall of the Ben Ali regime in Tunisia, we consider some of the key domestic and regional issues and challenges that have been revealed by the Arab Spring.

### *Domestic economic perspectives: from despair to hope?*

Dire economic conditions for a widening part of the population were a key factor in people's willingness to risk their lives and confront authoritarian regimes. To stop the diffusion process or mitigate its effects, governments across the regions have all resorted to economic populism. By this we mean that they have used a range of actions to lower prices on basic food and utilities and, even more importantly, to create jobs and raise the salaries of state employees. Such a reaction seems to have appeased the situation in the short term, thus confirming the strength of the economic factor beneath the mobilization of protest. However, there remains a key question about the sustainability of this measure, and the long-term relationship between democratization and economic development. This is the focus of the contribution by Oliver Schlumberger and Torsten Matzke. In terms of sustainability, one must draw a clear distinction between countries that have been able to tap into revenues from natural resources (Algeria, Gulf states) and those that have largely used deficit spending (Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt) to finance state jobs and salaries. For the latter, we know from examples in other parts of the world, most notably in Latin America, that there is a significant risk of ending up in sovereign debt crisis and more severe economic and social pain unless there is massive foreign help (in the form of grants rather than loans). So far, such foreign help has remained limited and is unlikely to rise significantly given the economic context that traditional donor countries have themselves been facing. Beyond the public financial constraints affecting donors, however, the issue of who should be helped is also likely to be a bone of contention. As recent initiatives by the European Union show, outside financial help is likely to target the private sector, small and medium enterprises, rather than contribute to the further bloating of the state, which as a result of the revolutions has become even more central than before. The situation looks easier for governments with natural resources with revenues that are unlikely to decline in the medium term. Yet, social stability will require a significant redistribution effort that could challenge the established elite to an extent it deems unacceptable, pushing governments to fiercely resist any change. As argued by Schlumberger and Matzke in their contribution to this debate, democratization and/or long-term social stability are unlikely if civil society is not significantly included in perspectives on economic development. The reactions of existing economic elites, who have been used to massive benefits over the last decades, are uncertain but unlikely to be cooperative. In countries where such elites are tightly connected to armed forces, such as in Egypt, this may well lead to serious reversals of the processes set in motion one year ago. Thus, while the economy, with additional help from the great global recession, may well have contributed to the blossoming of the Arab Spring, it may also put a quick, and nasty, end to an immense wave of hope.

*Individual freedom: change or continuity or both?*

As much as economic factors have mattered, aspirations of political freedom have been a formidable driver behind the protest. Hence to meet expectations, new governing bodies in Tunisia and Egypt, and to a lesser extent in Libya, have been keen to proceed quickly to elections. In other countries too there has been strong pressure towards new, freer and fairer opportunities for voters. As emphasized in Ellen Lust's contribution to this debate, there is reason for optimism: elections seem to have been free and fair and have succeeded in attracting wide spectrums of the population to the polls. They have also brought to the forefront parties that were either previously banned from participating in elections, or severely disadvantaged. And, they have been seen as a way to define countries' political and economic futures, most ostensibly in Tunisia. So, clearly the Arab Spring has brought change. Yet, Ellen Lust also points to some continuity. Indeed as it was the case before these revolutionary processes, elections were also used as a way to ensure access to state resources. Furthermore, elections have failed to rally all those who occupied the streets, leading for instance to a highly polarized situation in Egypt. It also remains to be seen whether voters' expectations of those they elected will be met. In the affirmative case, electoral dynamics will have contributed to the furthering of democratization. Otherwise, they may well have negative consequences.

One key issue facing newly elected politicians will be the place and role of religion in newly democratic societies. Mirjam Künkler's contribution to this debate approaches this issue in a comparative perspective, using as benchmarks five Muslim countries that have undergone successful democratization processes – Mali, Senegal, Indonesia, Turkey and Albania. To many less acute observers of these countries, Turkey would be the natural place to look for a model democratic state-religion relationship. But for Künkler such a model would be overly similar to the situation prevailing in Tunisia and Egypt before the revolutions. Then, states interfered deeply in religious affairs and thus, democratization requires significant state deregulation of religion. The source of inspiration, according to Künkler, is not Turkey but rather Mali and Senegal. There is reason to doubt that elected politicians will follow this path. Electoral debates have highlighted continued strong attachment to the primacy of state laws governing religion, rather than laws attached to the guarantee of individual rights including religious freedom.

*The (international) regional dimension: more of the same things?*

With the contagion of revolutionary processes seemingly on hold, it is time to draw some tentative lessons on the consequences of domestic changes on the regional landscape. In this debate we consider three dimensions of possible change. The first relates to the role of the European Union, the dominant economic magnet and democratic role model in the region. The second dimension focuses on the possible repercussions of the Arab Spring on the Israeli-Palestine conflict writ large. The third addresses normative changes in how regional actors understand their responsibility to protect individual human rights against flagrant domestic violations.

The Arab Spring could not have come at a worse time for the European Union struggling with the worst crisis since its creation. In such a context, there was little hope of expecting bold initiatives in foreign policy, or a major re-thinking of the form of tools able to help reconstruction challenges abroad. From this perspective, EU action or inaction has not come as a surprise. As Ruth Hanau Santini argues in her contribution to

this debate, the EU has not been able to remedy its lack of a comprehensive vision for the region and has often failed to bypass the post-colonial economic and political interests of some of its big members. It has offered some economic and financial help to the private sector, in particular via the European Investment Bank, and has created an endowment for the promotion of democracy. But the amounts have been dwarfed both by the needs of the region and by the promises made by broader multilateral initiatives. Yet, even more worrisome, the EU has failed to consider local specificities and been keen to promote European values and models in countries very different from the traditional membership of the EU. Nowhere has this been more evident than in attitudes toward political forces with clear Islamic standing. More broadly, the advent of the Arab Spring has not altered the EU's obsession with the Middle East peace process and with the behavior of Iran, two issues on which it is unlikely to make any significant difference in the near future. In sum, it seems that the EU has not yet seized the formidable opportunities for regional influence opened by the Arab Spring, and not reconsidered its flawed priorities in the region.

Turning to the impact of the Arab Spring on Israel-Palestine relations, Ravi Bhavnani and Karsten Donnay argue in their contribution that it is hard to see any direct connection between revolutionary processes in Arab countries and violence between Israelis and Palestinians. One exception has been the sporadic emergence of unarmed protest against Israel, which has posed a new, important challenge to the Israeli Army. Although it is difficult to predict what direction future influences will take, the turn of events in Egypt and Syria will weigh heavily on Israel's situation in the region. From this perspective, it is not hard to understand the cautious attitude of outside powers, including Western ones, vis-à-vis the violent repression in Syria. The same powers may well be tempted to limit change in Egypt and to help keep the army as the cornerstone of society. Such strategies may well backfire, however, with potentially worse consequences than the choice of a more change-oriented attitude.

The last contribution to this debate, by Oliver Jütersonke and Stephanie Hofmann, looks at the concept of the responsibility to protect (R2P), coined in 2001 by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS). R2P was taken up and expanded between 2005 and 2009 in various United Nations venues and documents, but rose to prominence when applied under Resolutions 1970 and 1973 on the situation in Libya. Is normative change underway, and will outside interventions be dictated by a widely shared sense of obligation to protect populations both at home and abroad? Jütersonke and Hofmann offer a very skeptical answer, pointing to the ambiguity of the concept of R2P and how it can be tailored to fit different strategic objectives and contexts. The striking variation in response to the repression of protest in Libya and Syria raises the question of what is driving foreign policy in major states. There is surely no overwhelming sense of a legal responsibility to protect that would supersede strategic political and economic interests. Equally revealing has been the seemingly double standard of the European Union regarding the protection of Libyan and Tunisian citizens. Calls for protection have been stronger when it came to action on African soils than when it pertained to European waters.

In sum, the Arab Spring has sent formidable, and largely unanticipated, shockwaves across established orders in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. Its specific lasting consequences, both at the domestic and international levels, will remain elusive for quite some time to most observers and analysts. We hope, however, that this second round of debate will contribute to an improvement of our

understanding of the many challenges and opportunities created by the revolutionary processes in Arab countries.