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WILL THERE BE A COUNTER-REVOLUTION THIS TIME?

The seasons after the Arab Spring

Revolt if not revolution in Sudan and Algeria: is this the next phase of a profound change in the Arab world? The uprisings haven't repeated the mistakes of 2011.

BY GILBERT ACHCAR



Ozan Kose · AFP · Getty

MAGES of popular protests that recall the revolutionary movement of 2011 have dominated news from the Arabic-speaking world for months. Uprisings began in Sudan on 19 December and in Algeria with the marches of Friday 22 February. They revived memories of the huge, peaceful demonstrations early in the Arab Spring that shook Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria.

Commentators have been more cautious this time, asking questions rather than commenting directly, mindful of the bitter disappointment that followed their initial euphoria over the Arab

Spring. The repression of the 2011 uprising in Bahrain, crushed after only a few weeks with the help of the other oil monarchies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), could have been the exception, given the unique characteristics of that club of states. But two years later the region entered a counter-revolutionary phase, with a new chain reaction going the other way.

Bashar al-Assad launched a new offensive in Syria in spring 2013 with the help of Iran and its regional allies. Then came the army-backed establishment of a repressive regime in Egypt, and the return to power of members of Tunisia's ousted government; in Cairo and Tunis, forces linked to the Muslim Brotherhood hijacked the initial revolutionary impetus. Emboldened by 2013's developments, remnants of the former regimes in Libya and Yemen formed opportunistic alliances with groups that had jumped on the bandwagon of the revolution and shared their hostility to the Muslim Brotherhood. Their attempts to take power by force ended in civil war. Enthusiasm gave way to melancholy in the 'Arab Winter' as the totalitarian terrorist enterprise ISIS gained a foothold.

Though this latest avatar of Al-Qaida was eventually crushed in Iraq and Syria (groups operating under the same franchise remain active in Libya, the Sinai peninsula and outside the Arab-speaking world), other counter-revolutionary forces remain on the offensive. The Assad clan continues its reconquest of most of Syria's territory with the help of Russia and Iran. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi's despotic regime, careless of the potential impact of rebellions in Sudan and Algeria, has adopted a constitutional amendment that allows him to remain in power until 2030 (1).

A long-term revolutionary process

In Libya, Sissi's admirer General Khalifa Haftar — backed by Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Russia and France, lately joined by the US — has since April been pursuing a military offensive in the west to take control of the whole country. Haftar wants to remove the Government of National Accord, recognised by the UN, the Muslim Brotherhood, Qatar and Turkey, and is undermining UN mediation for a new, inclusive political solution. In Yemen, civil war is still raging, its consequences made worse by the intervention of the Saudi-led coalition. There is little hope of lasting peace in the near future, or of national reunification.

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Given this counter-revolutionary trend, the uprisings in Sudan and Algeria seem for now less like a new Arab Spring than isolated upsurges in a shifting, contradictory context. They might grow and spread, or be brutally halted; in any event, their outcome will greatly affect the region's future. They have however confirmed that 2011 was only the first phase of a long-term revolutionary process. The term Arab Spring still makes sense, provided it is understood not as a short, relatively peaceful democratic transition, as many had hoped, but as the first of a *series* of 'seasons' likely to continue for years, or even decades.

The problem in the Arab world is not adapting political systems to societies and economies that have reached maturity, like those of Latin America or East Asia, where political modernisation put the finishing touches to a process of socioeconomic modernisation; rather, it is eliminating political systems that have hindered social and economic development since the 1980s. The main symptom is youth unemployment, in which this region has long held the world record (2).

Economies weaken

The events of 2011 could only have led to a new and lasting period of stability if there had also been a radical change in economic priorities; it was impossible while the state systems responsible for economic stagnation remained in place. In the absence of such changes, the protests were bound to continue and even grow, since the instability caused by the Arab Spring could only worsen the general economic weakness. Despite the counter-revolutionary offensive, several Arab-speaking countries have seen major new protests since 2011.

Tunisia is often presented as the success story of the Arab Spring because it has managed to hold on to the democratic gains achieved. Even if commentators generally fail to acknowledge it, preferring to focus on 'cultural' differences (due notably to the persistence of a Tunisian state for the last 300 years), the 'Tunisian exception' is closely linked to the role of the UGTT (Tunisian General Labour Union), the only organised labour movement in the Arab world that is both independent and influential (3). But Tunisia has continued to be shaken by protests, local and national, including those in the central city of Kasserine in January 2016, and the large demonstrations of January 2018. Countries that have seen major social movements since 2011 include Morocco, notably in the Rif region since October 2016; Jordan, especially in spring 2018; and Iraq, intermittently since 2015. Sudan has witnessed several upsurges since 2011, including one in 2013, harshly repressed.

Protests in every country have focused on unemployment and/or the cost of living. These problems have often been made worse by the heavy-handedness of the International Monetary Fund, which has shown unshakeable faith in its neoliberal creed. Its dogmatism runs contrary to the lessons of experience, corroborating the accusations that it is inspired more by a desire to protect the interests of capital than by pragmatic rationalism gone wrong. The IMF has concluded that the implosion of the Arab world is due to a failure to apply its remedies with sufficient zeal, though those remedies are clearly unsuited to regional realities.

The IMF's insistence on state disengagement and a central role for the private sector in development (which has never been shown to work) has contributed significantly to economic stagnation in the region. Since 2011 the IMF has increased pressure on governments to follow

its austerity programmes to the letter. The results have been quick to appear: besides the events already listed, there have been protests in Iran, where the same causes have led to similar outcomes since December 2017, despite the differences between Iran's political system and that of its Arab neighbours. Last January, protests against IMF-inspired measures simultaneously shook Iran, Sudan and Tunisia.

It is not by chance that the only government able to impose all of the IMF's austerity prescriptions has been the authoritarian Sissi regime. Of the 'shock therapy' applied since November 2016, Egyptians have so far experienced only the shock part. Unlike other peoples in the region, they have not risen up. Their lethargy is due partly to state repression, and partly to resignation to the fact that three years of upheaval (2011-13) only led to the establishment of a regime that makes them miss the Mubarak era (4). This resignation is exacerbated by the lack of a credible alternative solution.

Yet Egypt has not suffered in vain. Neighbouring countries have learned from its experience: they have been forewarned against the illusions the Egyptians had when their armed forces ousted Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 and overthrew his elected successor Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, in July 2013. It is now clear that when political power is founded on the military, the president and his entourage are only the tip of the iceberg; the part below water is mainly formed of the military-security complex — aptly referred to as the 'deep state'.



In the frame: graffiti mushroomed in Khartoum after the April 2019 coup that toppled President Omar al-Bashir
Kyodo News · Getty

Exploiting state and resources

The political systems of the Arabic-speaking world are dominated by castes that exploit the state and its resources. They are of two types: families reigning under a monarchic system, or one that is supposedly republican but allows state capture, and military-security and bureaucratic castes whose members profit from state resources under a neopatrimonial system. The different outcomes of the insurrections of 2011 were determined by the differences between these types.

In 2011, in neopatrimonial Tunisia and Egypt, the state apparatus was quick to get rid of the governing clique, which had become an embarrassment. In patrimonial states the reigning families unhesitatingly used their praetorian guard to crush uprisings with much bloodshed. Libya and Syria were plunged into civil wars, while in Bahrain the intervention of the GCC dissuaded the popular movement from taking up arms. Yemen fell into an intermediate category: the 2011 revolt ended in a rickety power-sharing arrangement eventually bound to lead to armed conflict.

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David Pilling

Sudan and Algeria, like Egypt, have regimes with a military-security backbone. As in Egypt, the military eventually tried to appease the people by sacrificing the president. The Algerian army forced Abdelaziz Bouteflika to resign on 2 April, and Sudan's military junta deposed and took Omar al-Bashir into custody on 11 April.

These coups were conservative, like those mounted by the Egyptian military in February 2011, when they announced Mubarak's 'resignation': the army sacrificed the tip of the iceberg to preserve the part below the surface. As in Egypt, the Algerian and Sudanese armed forces sacrificed their ousted presidents' close allies and the people and institutions most directly compromised in the abuses and misappropriations of the abhorred regimes. But in both countries, the popular movements, learning from the Egyptian experience (and from earlier experiences in Sudan), have not fallen into the trap. They persist in demanding an end to military control of political power, and the establishment of a genuinely civilian and democratic government.

'Imagination in power'

These new uprisings have in common mobilisation on a huge scale and joyous expressions of protest, in the tradition of the great emancipatory revolts that put 'imagination in power' (5). They also share an awareness that they are dealing with a regime structured around the military; the latter's high command cannot be expected to rid them of the regime. In Algeria and Sudan, the high command presents itself as the spearhead of the revolutionary changes to which the people aspire, like Gamal Abdel Nasser's Free Officers movement in Egypt in 1952, or the Armed Forces Movement in Portugal in 1974 (both cases of young officers rebelling against their hierarchy); but this has not fooled many.

This year's revolts differ in one important way: the nature of their leadership. This is a crucial issue: the failure of most of the 2011 uprisings, and the partial success of the only one whose democratic gains have been preserved, have the same explanation. The Arab Spring was called post-modern because it seemed to be leaderless. But no popular movement can last under such conditions; even those that arise spontaneously must acquire leaders to persist.

In Tunisia, UGTT trade unionists played a key role in extending the uprising nationwide and overthrowing the dictator in January 2011. In Egypt, a conglomerate of opposition political organisations initiated the revolt and assumed leadership until Mubarak's departure. In Bahrain, members of the political opposition and trade unionists were in the front line. In Yemen, some factions of the government formed an alliance with the political opposition to take advantage of the movement, to the detriment of the young revolutionaries who had been its main instigators.

In Libya, the uprising's rapid degeneration into armed conflict produced a leadership of old and new opposition figures, including former supporters of the regime. Syria had the longest period of horizontal leadership (not the same thing as a lack of leadership) with the formation of 'coordinating committees' communicating via social media, until the Syrian National Council, formed in Istanbul under the auspices of Turkey and Qatar, assigned itself the role of leader.

Turkey and Qatar managed to bring all the 2011 uprisings, except Bahrain, under their control through their sponsorship of the Muslim Brotherhood which, though not involved in initiating the rebellions, was quick to join and take them over. The Brotherhood and its allies were already well established in Egypt and Yemen. They had been driven underground in Libya, Tunisia and Syria, but in those countries had extensive networks that enjoyed the material and media (through Al Jazeera) support of Qatar, as did the legal or semi-legal branches of the Brotherhood in the other countries.

Muslim Brotherhood's fortunes

Because of the general weakness of leftwing and liberal (in the political sense) opposition organisations in the Arabic-speaking world, which were deprived of foreign government support and exhausted by repression, the regional influence of the Muslim Brotherhood and related groups peaked in 2011-12. In Tunisia and Egypt they participated in the elections organised after a short transition period, taking power in both countries. The Moroccan monarchy sought

to pre-empt the growth of the protests that began on 22 February 2011 by co-opting the Moroccan branch of the Brotherhood into government.

The only surprise was the Muslim Brotherhood's defeat in the parliamentary election of July 2012 in Libya, where it lost to the National Forces Alliance, a liberal coalition of political groups and NGOs that took nearly 50% of all votes (turnout 61.6%), almost five times as many as the Brotherhood. This defeat followed the first round of Egypt's presidential election in May, in which the total number of votes won by candidates representing liberal and leftwing parties exceeded the combined total for the leading candidates representing the Brotherhood and the former regime, and was more than double the number of votes won by Morsi. It was further proof that, contrary to common wisdom inspired by orientalism — in Edward Said's sense (6) — the peoples of the Arabic-speaking world are not culturally won over to 'political Islam'.

More than a cultural issue, this is a politico-organisational one. The democratic forces, from liberals (secular and Muslim) to far left, that express the majority aspirations of the popular movements, have proved unable to organise themselves into coalitions; and equally unable to project themselves as alternatives to the two reactionary camps — the supporters of the former regimes and their Muslim fundamentalist rivals. Unfortunately, in every country involved in the Arab Spring, liberal and leftwing opposition groups made the mistake of colluding with one reactionary camp against the other, sometimes switching sides as the main perceived danger changed, which resulted in the political marginalisation of these groups.

To a great extent, the current uprisings in Sudan and Algeria are safe from being taken over by Islamic fundamentalists. This strengthens their ability to oppose the machinations of the military: the Brotherhood was a valuable ally to the armed forces in Egypt in early 2011. In Algeria, the experience of the 'black decade' — the bloody struggle between the military-security complex and the fundamentalists of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) and its offshoots after the coup of January 1992 — has made the people suspicious of both. The Algerian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood collaborated with the military, supported Bouteflika and took part in government for many years. Most leaders of the protests that began this February would oppose any attempt by fundamentalists to take over the leadership of the movement as strongly or more strongly than they reject the military high command's claim to represent their aspirations.

In Sudan, popular opposition to both reactionary camps is all the more radical because they have shared power since Omar al-Bashir's 1989 coup. As head of a military dictatorship allied with the Muslim Brotherhood (the relationship did not always go smoothly), Bashir was like a mixture of Morsi and Sissi (7). A key feature of the Sudanese uprising, more politically radical than any in the Arabic-speaking world since 2011, is its open opposition to the rule of either the military or their fundamentalist allies, and its declared wish for a civilian, secular, democratic and even feminist government.

Political leadership

This radicalism is linked to another feature that contributes to the superiority of the Sudanese movement: its exceptional political leadership. The Algerian movement is limited by the plurality and horizontality of its organisation, in which groups of university students cooperate via social

media with liberal and leftwing political opposition groups, and collectives of employees and professionals, with no one group able to claim the leadership. By contrast, no one disputes the leading role that the Forces for the Declaration of Freedom and Change (FDFC) play in Sudan.

In this alliance, formed around a declaration adopted on 1 January, the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA) is central. The SPA is an umbrella organisation formed secretly in October 2016 by doctors, journalists and lawyers, subsequently joined by teachers, engineers, pharmacists, artists and, more recently, factory workers and railway workers. The FDFC also include political opposition parties ranging from the National Umma party, led by Sadiq al-Mahdi (a liberal and head of a Sufi order who has twice served as prime minister, during the 1960s and 80s) to the Sudanese Communist Party, the largest communist party still active in the Arab world (though considerably weakened since the 1960s) and regional armed groups opposed to the Bashir regime. There are two feminist groups, the No to Oppression Against Women Initiative and the Civilian and Political Feminist Groups, whose influence is clear in the FDFC programme, which includes reserving a 40% quota of seats for women in the legislative assembly that the alliance demands (8).

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On Sudan, *Financial Times* journalist David Pilling resorts to comparisons of a kind usually found in far-left commentary: 'Though the uprising owes much to 21st-century technology, with the convening power of smartphones and hashtags, there is a retro-revolutionary feel to a movement that has both a secular and a syndicalist tinge. One cannot know for sure what Russia felt like in 1917 as the tsar was being toppled, or France in 1871 in the heady, idealistic days of the short-lived Paris Commune. But it must have felt something like Khartoum in April 2019' (9).

The FDFC are battling the military high command over who should govern Sudan during the transition period, and how long it should last. The alliance is calling for the establishment of a sovereign council, in which it would dominate and the military would be a minority, while the military insist they should retain control of sovereign power. It may seem paradoxical that the alliance wants the transition period before elections to last no less than three years, while the military want to keep it as short as possible. But the FDFC have learned from the constitutional, legislative and presidential elections in Tunisia and Egypt, which were held after only a short transition period, encouraging a reactionary polarisation that worked against the progressives. They want time to build new institutions to support a civilian, democratic, secular government that will be progressive on socioeconomic and women's issues — as outlined in their draft

transitional constitution. They also need time to build a progressive political movement and a political organisation fit to support their popular leadership.

This explains why the Sudanese uprising is of far greater concern to the region's reactionaries than Algeria's. The frenemies of the GCC — Saudi Arabia and the UAE as well as Qatar — all offered Bashir their support before he was deposed. Saudi Arabia and the UAE have stepped up their support of the Sudanese military, now led by officers who fought alongside them in Yemen. They are trying to break up the FDFC by winning over their 'moderates', especially the National Umma Party, while encouraging the military to resort to religious demagoguery (they accuse the alliance of wanting to eliminate sharia from Sudan's legislation) with the support of the Salafists, clients of Saudi Arabia, and the Muslim Brothers, who both dispute the FDFC's leadership claim.

Will all this lead to revolutionary radicalisation, as in 1917 in Russia, or a bloodbath like the end of the Paris Commune, to use David Pilling's comparisons? The Sudanese revolutionaries' trump card is their great influence over the military rank and file and junior officers, some of whom have used their firearms to defend protesters. This is why the high command refused to use troops against the movement when Bashir urged them to do so. As in Russia and Paris, this is the crucial factor that will determine the outcome of Sudan's revolution.

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Translated by Charles Goulden

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- (1) See Bahey Eldin Hassan, 'Egypt: the permanent coup [<https://orientxxi.info/magazine/egypt-the-permanent-coup,3030>]', *Orient XXI*, 15 April 2019.
 - (2) For analysis and data on the effects of this stagnation, see Gilbert Achcar, *The People Want: a Radical Exploration of the Arab Uprising*, Saqi Books, 2013.
 - (3) For more on the UGTT, a co-recipient of the 2015 Nobel peace prize, see H ela Yousfi, *Trade Unions and Arab Revolutions: the Tunisian Case of UGTT*, Routledge, 2017.
 - (4) See Pierre Daum, 'Tahrir Square, seven years on', *Le Monde diplomatique*, English edition, March 2018.
 - (5) ' "L'imagination au pouvoir [<https://www.nouvelobs.com/politique/le-congres-du-ps/20081023.OBS7477/l-imagination-au-pouvoir-une-interview-de-daniel-cohn-bendit-par-jean-paul-sartre-1968.html>] ", une interview de Daniel Cohn-Bendit par Jean-Paul Sartre' ('Imagination in power', Jean-Paul Sartre interviews Daniel Cohn-Bendit), *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Paris, 20 May 1968.
 - (6) Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, Pantheon, New York, 1978.
 - (7) See Gilbert Achcar, 'The fall of Sudan's "Morsisi" [<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2019/04/sudan-omar-al-bashir-arab-spring>]', *Jacobin*, 12 May 2019.
 - (8) The Association of Democratic Women of Tunisia also played a notable role in protests and the constitutive process, but feminism was less central in the Tunisian events.
 - (9) David Pilling, 'Sudan's protests feel like a trip back to revolutionary Russia', *Financial Times*, London, 24 April 2019.

TRANSLATIONS >>

FRANÇAIS Le Soudan et l'Algérie reprennent-ils le flambeau du « printemps arabe » ? (fr)

ESPAÑOL ¿Toman Argelia y Sudán el relevo de la “primavera árabe”? (es)

DEUTSCH Revolutionen brauchen ihre Zeit (de)