The Arab Spring Uprisings: Transnational Change-Making

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Abstract

This paper addresses the context of the *Arab Spring* uprisings and the conditions that allowed them to flourish. The events in the Spring of 2011 that served as catalysts for change, began to address demands for democratic political institutions to advance the protection of citizens' rights. Amid changing cultural values in these primarily Arab and Muslim countries, many social groups mobilized to seek revolution. Although the events across these countries were not intentionally related, a connection existed based on their methods and goals, and shared cultural identity. Throughout this period and in the present, there was an increase in the presence of youth voices and social media use. In addition to this, there will be a brief analysis of the relative successes of these movements and the factors that contributed to those outcomes. The evaluation will be based on a degree of success that includes, low, medium, and high levels.

All meaningful movements for change involve the mobilization of a critical mass of people who are committed to uprooting the systems that oppress them. There is extensive organizing that is required to sustain a movement and demand the change that you wish to see. This work is compounded exponentially when striving to affect the widespread ideological shift of an entire country. When we look at the uprisings that took place in what we know as *The Arab Spring,* we are introduced to dozens of individualized movements that are unified in their struggle, thematic goals, and cultural values. In addition to that, there exists a common thread between their cultural identities. The Arab Spring can be characterized as a group of loosely related uprisings aimed at increasing the presence of democracy in their respective governments, largely taking place in Arab countries with a predominantly Muslim population or states that identify themselves as Muslim. In an analysis of the trends that have occurred during the key periods of organizing, we can see a large influence from the youth in those communities, and the use of social media as a tactic for activism. The goal of this research is to look at the events of the Arab Spring and their different outcomes regarding their *proximity* to democracy and degree of success. The role of social media in organizing and establishing networks, as well as youth involvement will also be considered. With the influence of these exterior factors, there is no doubt that social movements and advocacy are inherently shaped by the methods employed by their constituencies.

Before examining individual outcomes, it is important to provide some larger context on the issue. There is a unique dynamic of space and place that define the uprisings of the Arab Spring, that highlight the importance of language and naming in advocacy work. The name Arab Spring comes to us as a phrase coined by the Western media amid these events, which began in the Spring of 2011 across multiple Arab countries. Some sources suggest that the term is related

to that of *The People's Spring* in Europe, which referred to the revolutions of 1848 that were also characterized by political upheaval and a shift in rights for various groups. Given this parallel, Western scholars and news outlets created a similar term to describe these events. As we've learned, creating language around inherently political subjects has the power to frame those issues and the people who are directly involved. However, it is also important to acknowledge that Western perceptions are often dominant, and can inevitably color our understanding of global events, especially those that occur in the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region. The region's legacy of colonial influence and subsequent challenges in the socio-political sphere are inextricably linked.

The uprisings that began in 2011 sought to address the increasing instability of national governments, the desire for cultural freedom and a demand for more democratic institutions. This revolutionary work took place primarily in the countries of Tunisia, Morocco, Syria, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, and Yemen. Each of these countries has unique histories, most of which are authoritarian in nature. In understanding these grassroots efforts, we can also see the significant challenges that face organizers who are trying to uproot highly insulted governmental institutions and create fundamental changes in their operations. Because of this, we can also see spill over into the present day, some of which has occurred because the uprisings failed to produce the desired result. For this analysis, the primary countries of focus will be Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Libya. Although a more in-depth historical chronology is required to address the current state of affairs in each of these countries, and to achieve a full picture of democratic progression, this research is focused on understanding the connections between these sporadic uprisings.

The Case of Tunisia

On December 17ᵗʰ, 2020, a man named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in the ultimate act of protest – sacrificing his life. According to his loved ones, his whole life was riddled with instances of mistreatment by local officials and security forces, resulting in constant humiliation. Bouazizi was a street vendor arrested for the failure to acquire a permit for his vegetable cart, the same cart that had become his means of providing for himself and his family since he was a child. On the day of his death, he was harassed by police officers claiming that he required a permit because street vending was illegal, but that has proven to be false. After having his cart confiscated and his produce thrown about, he was slapped and beaten, and his cries went underheard by the local government. This act of suppression and threat to his livelihood resulted in a fatal response and served as the catalyst for the 'Jasmine Revolution' in Tunisia. Protests began all over the country as citizens demanded change and sought to achieve relief from repressive labor restrictions and class division, as well as what Lisa Anderson calls a 'suspended constitution'. In an article titled, "Demystifying the Arab Spring: Parsing the Differences Between Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya", Anderson calls attention to the neglected rural communities and those demanding better living conditions, wages, and a more representative government. After the death Mohamed Bouazizi, there are reports that police and security forces killed hundreds of protestors in the months that followed. Tunisia serves as the foundation for the protests that were sparked in countries all over the Arab world, beginning in the Maghreb region. Citizens and social groups in Tunisia pleaded with President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, but his actions failed to live up to the demands of his constituents. Under his authoritarian regime, there was much discontent with his leadership and many demonstrators called for his resignation. After the many deaths that resulted from violent encounters with Tunisian security forces, the

human rights abuses perpetrated by the state were highlighted for the world to see. With a chaotic and dissolving system of government, Ben Ali abdicated his role as president and fled with his family to Saudi Arabia, resulting in a regime change.

After the exile of Ben Ali, the Tunisian minister of justice announced the interim government that would be in place from January to October of 2011. The United States Institute of Peace tells us that *Ennahda*, "a moderate Islamist party took hold over the government after winning the national elections and formed a government with two secular parties" (Abouaoun, 2019). The success of this party was the result of their first democratic parliamentary elections. However, despite a relatively peaceful transferal of power after the removal of the interim government, Tunisia faced significant political debates that sewed more seeds of division. In light of their attempt to rework their constitution, there became a need to address the extent to which the religion of Islam should be involved in the political structure of the country. More political instability and turmoil ensued after protestors held *Ennahda* responsible for the assassinations of 2 politicians who were advocates for a secular government. From this point forward, another interim government was established, and in 2014 the secularist parties won out over Islamists. Although this subject is incredibly nuanced, the important thing to note is that the years following the initial spark in late 2010, were characterized by events that contributed to growing political upheaval and the dangerous economic situation in the country. Protests continued into the year 2018 despite the presence of democratic elections. These elections were also plagued with low voter turnout, due to the "public fatigue after years of being disappointed by several governments and an array of parties" (Abouaoun, 2019). In as recent as February of 2021, protestors are still in the streets to call for action on the economic situation of Tunisia, while security forces are still responding with violence and excessive force against them.

The Case of Egypt

In terms of chronology, Egypt must come next in the discussion of the events of the Arab

Spring. According to an article titled "The Arab Spring: U.S Democracy Promotion in Egypt" by

Snider and Faris, "the Egyptian uprisings were wholly unexpected by journalists, policy makers

and scholars" (Snider and Faris, 2011). It was on January 25th, 2011, that the city of Cairo bared

witness to the first 'coordinated' mass protests that were tangential to the events unfolding in

Tunisia. On Facebook, organizers called for a "Day of Revolution" that mobilized protestors.

This article points to the notion of the *wave theory of social movements*, which suggests that

there are waves of popularity in which movements for rights occur, some of which are often

cyclical. This concept is typically referred to in the context of American politics, but it is

interesting to consider its place in the transnational context. In 2011, the state of Egypt was also

characterized by a dire economic situation, a high rate of poverty, and a collapse of the

infrastructure that provided social services. The government was losing control of the ability to

provide for its citizens, alienating masses of people all over the country. In a comparison to other

countries, Egypt saw a rise in the political power of their youth as the younger generation proved

to be a force to be reckoned with. This revolution took place after their longest sitting president,

Muhammad Hosni El Sayed Mubarak, was ousted during a sustained demonstration that lasted

18 days. After about 43 years of ruling the country, Mubarak resigned and was then ordered to

stand trial for a failure to stop the murders of civilian protestors by Egyptian security forces.

After this, the country had also seen their first democratic elections, and in 2012 the

Muslim Brotherhood took over the presidency through Mohamed Morsi, but that was soon

voided. Morsi only served in this capacity for a year and four days and was ousted by military

coup. In 2013, this upheaval only grew as the army led by Abdel-Fattah El-Sisi staged a coup

against Morsi. "The move against Morsi deepened the political schism", and although Morsi incurred lots of backlash, there were many protests organized against his departure as the "only civilian president democratically elected" in the country (Nada and Rowan, 2019). In the present day, El-Sisi and the military regime are still standing, holding a significant monopoly over the government. Human rights advocacy groups and ordinary citizens continue to say that this authoritarian regime actively limits their freedom of expression and curtails their movement. The influence of ISIS militants in Egypt has also created a barrier to change, as the government sought to implement restrictions on the actions of NGOS (non-governmental organizations) and other organizations, in response to the increase in ISIS attacks between 2014 and 2017. Since then, unemployment and poverty continue to persist, while social unrest follows. One of the primary contributing factors of this unrest, was the increase in costs for food and fuel that threatened financial stability and the livelihoods of so many. However, the expansive youth population in Egypt should also be regarded as a catalyst for the increase in social commentary and advocacy. In the most recent elections, El-Sisi has continued to retain power due to low voter turnout and a lack of significant competition. Because of the current hold that he has, those who speak out in opposition continue to be held in detention on 'politically motivated charges', as the military seeks to silence dissidents at home and abroad. In 2021, the people of Egypt are still seeing the occurrence of human rights abuses at the hands of police and security forces, the arrest and detention of dissidents who are forced into horrible prison conditions, as well as a break down in the legal system. These are just a few things that have multiplied the risk of instability in Egypt.

The Case of Morocco

Morocco's experience regarding uprisings of the Arab Spring is of particular interest, due to the lack of Western international coverage. The coverage that has occurred has created a stain based on the wholly inaccurate and limiting belief that Morocco is not as geopolitically important as its counterparts. On February 20th of 2011, protestors followed suit and took the streets to publicly demand "a constitutional monarchy in which an elected and accountable government would have control over the country's social, economic, and security policies" (Sater, 2011). To provide some context, Morocco was under the rule of King Hassan II, a member of the Alaouite dynasty, until his death in 1999. He was largely known for his fierce authoritarianism and being one of the country's most 'severe' rulers. King Hassan II came to the throne after the colonial period and changed the fabric of the Moroccan government and society. Since 1999, Mohammed VI of Morocco has succeeded his father's rule as King, whom many believe has continued the controlling legacy left by his predecessor. Much of the protests that began during 2011 were centered upon discord about the power of the King since the country's independence, but the bulk of these movements didn't call for the removal of Mohammed VI, but rather a decrease in his power. In addition to that, there were calls for significant constitutional reforms. On May 22nd, 2011, Moroccan police forces beat thousands of demonstrators calling for more democracy. Shortly after, Moroccan voters approved the constitutional changes to constrain some of the monarchy's power. Despite the fact that Morocco is one of the more liberal and 'loose' authoritarian regimes in the MENA region, this did not change the sentiment of those seeking revolution, as events like the one on May 22nd only strengthened their perspective and inspired them to continue their fight. "Nevertheless, Morocco is considered to be one of the most democratic Islamic states in the Arab world as it holds formal

elections and its public press has a degree of freedom of expression" (Brouwer and Bartels, 2014).

In comparison to the uprisings in other countries, the impact of Morocco's Arab Spring has seemed to decline and "fizzle out". Scholars and news media have commented on the short-lived nature of their protests, as King Mohammed VI has managed to escape the political dissent of the movement that began 10 years ago. Under his rule, the monarchy has made considerable efforts to stamp out dissent and promote the reforms that so many called for. According to Human Rights Minister Mustapha Ramid, "Morocco isn't a paradise for human rights, but at the same time, it's not hell-riddled with violations as some people are trying to falsely make out" (Ramid to France 24, 2021). To their credit, one of the King's projects involved the establishment of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission to give victims of human rights abuses access to government arenas, so that they may seek remedy for the harms done to them. Although this does not completely address events past or present, many consider it to be a step in the right direction. After the initial events of the Arab Spring in Morocco, there seemed to be some acknowledgement of the 'reformist' mindset of this monarchy and their efforts to maintain political stability. Mohammed VI has created committees to draft and suggest reforms to the constitution. "It promotes gender equality…it also upgrades the importance of *Tamazight*, the language of the Amazigh (Berber) people" (Sater, 2011). According to a report on the 'Reform and Policy under King Mohammed VI', there have been significant strides in migration policy, the development of women's rights and the judicial system. Although these changes are important, Morocco is still in a precarious economic situation marked by poverty and high rates of unemployment. Although the country possesses a liberal constitution, there is still a call for

more robust social services that can uplift the community, address the class division, and promote economic growth.

The Case of Libya

From a scholarly perspective, Libya presents a wealth of conflict to choose from and a wide array of complexities that plague their social and political context. According to an article called 'Tracking the Arab Spring: Libya Starts from Scratch' by Boduszuński and Pickard, "indeed, the country lacks nearly all the features generally deemed crucial to successful democratization. For 42 years, the regime of Muammar al-Qadhafi pursued a policy of 'statelessness', preventing the development of effective governing institutions" (Boduszuński and Pickard, 2013). The Qadhafi era primarily erupted as a response to the colonial history of Libya, as some scholars posit that his approach to governance was motivated by a desire to redefine the country and seek revenge for the brief, but brutal legacy of colonialism that remained. His leadership that began in 1969, quickly transformed into a socialist state, but he still maintained control over the military and Revolutionary Committees. He was known for suppressing dissent and ruling with a heavy emphasis on the police state. He declared a "cultural revolution" characterized by *revolutionary* work that ultimately led to decentralized government, tribalism, and a host of human rights violations. Although Qadhafi was killed in 2011, he left a legacy of wealth disparities, high unemployment rates and a failing infrastructure. His *cult of personality* was heavily ingrained throughout the country, and his authoritarian regime ultimately led to the events of Libya's Arab Spring. Inspired by the uprisings in the aforementioned countries, protests erupted in 2011, beginning in Benghazi and spreading to cities all over. This led to an escalation in violent interactions between security forces and opposition to the Qadhafi

regime. As a result of these clashes, a regime change was called for, resulting in the recognition of the National Transitional Council (NTC) as the legitimate government of Libya. The NTC was an internationally acknowledged opposition group during the Libyan Civil War which was established to bring peace to the region. During this time, Muammar al-Qadhafi went into hiding but was captured and killed in October of that year. The transitional government held power until August of 2012, when the General National Congress was elected.

In the years following the Qadhafi regime, political unrest and war has ensued. Protests have played out as a constant backdrop to the soundtrack of instability, and transitions of power have by no means been peaceful. The influence of the Islamic State has been a primary source of contention in more recent years, as militant Islamists groups have continued to struggle for power against the General National Congress. The United Nations has since stepped in to try to minimize the fallout and mediate the situation, especially considering the high numbers of displaced citizens and the subsequent refugee crisis that have been the result of these armed struggles. In 2016 the UN announced the implementation of a Tunisian-based interim government, but the parliaments of Tobruk and Tripoli failed to recognize their legitimacy in the interim. Later, the UN backed the Government of National Accord, but the Libyan National Army led by General Khalifa Haftar began to clash with the newest internationally recognized government in 2017. As of March 2021, Abdul Hamid Debeibeh serves as the Prime Minister of the Government of National Accord. Since 2011, it would seem that almost every other year, Libya is faced with a transition of power, contributing to the history of political instability, while the added influence of international bodies has only served to crystalize the remnants of colonialism and its impact on the country. Although the remarks of Boduszuński and Pickard are indicative of Libya in 2013, their assessments seem to reign true in the present day, "Trying to

build democracy in a landscape stripped of institutions is like making bricks without straw. Creating democracy and institutions side-by-side is immensely challenging, since fledgling democracy must rely on working institutions that can legitimate it and enable it to deliver the public goods (order, prosperity, and the rest) that any government worthy of the name must provide." This is a credit to the legacy left by colonialism and the Qadhafi regime.

Youth and the Power of Social Media

Although this includes only a minor part of the mobilization efforts during the Arab Spring uprisings, there is so much literature present about the role of social media in this revolutionary period. As we know, the advent of social networking has allowed us to maximize the utility of our messages and our movements. In movements like Black Lives Matter and the Black Liberation Movement in the United States, social media has given people a significant tool to express their discontent and rage that results from oppression. For countries that have less agency regarding the freedom of expression, social media has provided a new and important opportunity. Although some scholars have argued that social media was the causal mechanism behind these uprisings, it is clear that social media has only helped to aid the spread of this *wave* for rights and increased democracy among countries of the Arab world. The use of platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and other news media, put a global spotlight on the experiences of protestors and the context of these movements. They provided a unique access to 'citizen journalism' that existed without the spin of capitalistic news media. It allows for communication to the outside world about what events and experiences are occurring on the ground floor, while also creating platforms for communication within and among advocacy groups. For example, Snider and Faris explained that in Egypt during a labor strike in 2008, "a movement emerged on Facebook

dedicated to a sympathy strike with the textile workers. Within weeks, this group had 70,000 members (at a time when fewer than 500,000 Egyptians were on Facebook), and the regime started to take them seriously a few days before the strike" (Snider and Faris, 2011). Amid the uprisings of 2011, this social media presence was amplified due to the *youth bulge* that characterized Egypt's Arab Spring. A similar trend occurred in Morocco, as independent protestors in Rabat explained that "they had been discussing political issues at a secret space on Facebook and that the revolts in Tunisia and Egypt had given them hope" (Brouwer and Bartels, 2014).

Social media has served as a method of transcending space and place, something that is inherently integral in the work of transnational advocacy. In addition to that, it creates a proverbial forum that promotes discourse and encourages action as a result. Social media has become invaluable in the work of social movements and organizing, taking their possibility for exposure to new heights. It has maximized the efficacy of their critical mass by diffusing responsibility across various planes. It has created access to a larger network of individuals that can be mobilized in their respective areas; individuals that have the power to actively participate in political claims-making by putting faces to a collective voice. The movements in Egypt and Morocco are the best examples of these trends during the Arab Spring, as they sought to move beyond the classical methods of social movements and use social media to their advantage to develop new tactics and build relationships. A study from the University of Washington states that they analyzed "more than 3 million tweets, gigabytes of YouTube content and thousands of blog posts" that showed the immense presence of social media in shaping political debates during the Arab Spring and sharing the stories of the individuals that carried these movements (O'Donnell, 2011). In response to the regime of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, "videos featuring

protest and political commentary went viral – the top 23 videos received nearly 5.5 million

views" (O'Donnell, 2011). When discussing the impact of social media on the uprisings of the

Arab Spring, we cannot separate that conversation from the one about the role of youth

populations.

In general, the *youth bulge* has presented itself as a matter of study across many countries

of the Arab world. Many people are becoming emboldened and inspired to take on roles as

activists and advocates for change. This is both admirable and essential to the progression of our

world. In a publication from the United States Institute of Peace, Stephanie Schwartz tells us

that, "young people in the Middle East, especially the growing urban youth population, have

been hurt by low wages, high unemployment and high food prices that have exacerbated their

existing discontent" (Schwartz, 2011). With youth being most impacted by sustained social

violence, they are primed and ready to take action to secure their future and that of the next

generation. Our youth are enraged by government corruption and the lack of economic stability,

and they can create expansive advocacy networks to address that. With this in mind, we must

also consider the shortcomings of such widespread social media use in organizing. In general,

controlled, and centralized messaging, is hard to maintain when dealing with such large groups,

and that is only amplified when social media takes hold. The accountability from those involved

within the movement can decrease to some degree, as there is less energy involved in 'social

media activism'. This means that efforts may not be as durable, because the space for grassroots

organizing has transitioned to a global and social marketplace. We also know that the prevalence

of misinformation can also create existential harms to the movements that so many are working

hard to advance. Youth movements and their social media tactics are being asked to go up

against firmly established institutions and security forces, which requires a deep level of commitment and sustainability.

Case Study Conclusion

As we look to the countries of Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, and Libya, we can see varied levels of success across the Arab Spring's participating nations. To compare these transnational initiatives, *low*, *medium,* and *high*, will be the scale used to typify these degrees of success. In some cases, instability was advanced as a result of the Arab Spring. The impacts of these sustained protests and uprisings are still ever present in Libya and Egypt, while Morocco and Tunisia have seemed to subvert much of the political upheaval in the present day. Libya and its people have been in the middle of a persistent game of *tug of war*, as they've been pulled in various directions from armed opposition groups, internationally recognized outsiders, and other groups with different agendas. In a state riddled with cracks in their foundation, this is does not present an ideal scenario for citizens and officials that are in the pursuit of democratization. The Italian colonial period was only a short of time before the Qadhafi regime took over, and blow after blow has been delivered since. The presence of the UN and other world powers has also served to decentralize the government further and divert political power away from Libyans that are pursuing revolution. The situation in Libya has become an issue of global concern with influence being at the mercy of more actors than one nation can handle. Libya has experienced a low degree of success, that is marked by a global network which has constantly overwhelmed the situation. Although the goal has been to target government institutions, so many transitions of power have taken place, constraining the efforts of those protesting in these uprisings. In addition

to that, the systemic harms caused by the Qadhafi regime have not been addressed, but cannot be addressed until a stable government, democratic or otherwise, has been established.

In Egypt's case, they are also tasked with "building political institutions – constitutions, political parties, and electoral systems" (Anderson, 2011). The situation is quite similar to that of Libya, but not as seemingly insurmountable in the eyes of Western scholars. Despite Mubarak being ousted, the revolution was effectively overturned with the establishment of El-Sisi as President. This president has control over the military, resulting in insulation and a consolidation of power. In addition to that, many of those who were involved in Mubarak's inner circle are still actively working in the current government. As we look to this case, the degree of success was also low, due to these tools of measurement as well. In both Egypt and Libya, there is also a lack of considerable political agency held by the grassroots organizers seeking change. Once again, the youth at the forefront of these movements are facing well-established regimes and political leaders without leverage and information politics on their side. On the other hand, Morocco provides an example that is not quite comparable to that of the other three. Although Morocco still has a way to go, they began the Arab Spring uprisings with a much more amenable government, and a significantly less repressive regime with their monarchy. I would consider their degree of success to be medium, relative to where they started. Their barriers to equal opportunity were much less impermeable than that of their counterparts in the Arab world. Although King Mohammed VI represents a monarchy, many of their institutions were democratic in nature, but have since been reformed to expand that push for democracy.

Lastly, we look to the case of Tunisia which has experienced a medium level of success in comparison to its counterparts. "Among the region's 22 countries, Tunisia's progress is encouraging, as it has a comparatively robust civil society. Institutions have undergone major

reforms" (Abouaoun, 2019). With more obstacles to overcome, Tunisia has managed to make meaningful efforts in achieving a more democratized state. Although Tunisia has had a more repressive historical context to overcome than Morocco, both have achieved a similar level of success based on the qualifiable efforts they've made towards reform. However, as news appears in the present day, there is clear evidence that human rights abuses are still an issue that need to be addressed. They are not effectively addressing the issues of bodily harm against civilians by the state and must target the government to do so. With no leverage and no outlet for accountability, further efforts are going to continue to be difficult.

Overall, this case study into these four sites of the Arab Spring uprisings, demonstrate the power of transnational advocacy and the ways in which social media can carry messages of freedom beyond borders. We can see the barriers and challenges facing social movements that need sustained commitment and force to overturn years of engrained damage. The colonial histories of each of these countries is also uniquely important in addressing the current leadership of these countries in the modern-day. One cannot criticize or judge the methods of activists and citizens that are experiencing these harms, nor can they effectively contextualize the evolution of these institutions, without acknowledging the role of colonialism in establishing this trajectory. The conclusion of this analysis also yields a clear connection that validates the power of the youth voice, and the advocacy roles that they are beginning to occupy at increasing levels. Most importantly, we can see the hope for change that these cases provide for the people within their own countries, across the MENA region, and for all of us across the globe.

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