

# Trajectories of Arab Revolution: Miracle or Mirage

**Jishnu Prasad**

Research scholar, Department of English, M.G. University, Kochi, Kerala, India,

## **Abstract**

The Arab Revolution, hailed as a beacon of hope, initially promised widespread political and social transformation. However, its trajectory has proven complex, oscillating between miraculous achievements and disillusionment. While some nations embraced reform, others fell into chaos and authoritarianism. This research paper explores what part new media plays in North Africa and the Middle East (MENA) region's "Arab Spring". The "Arab Spring" began in late 2010 and early 2011. Politics were violent in most populist movements. All were against authoritarian power at the start, but the results varied in each country. Egypt, as well as Tunisia's democratic politics, differed after authoritarian control ended. Armed uprisings began in Libya and Syria. This paper discusses how the "Arab Spring" divergent paths and outcomes were affected by the legacy of the previous regime, organisational and legally binding decisions made during the "transition" from a totalitarian government, socioeconomic factors, and ethnic, sectarian, and geographic diversity. Egypt and Syria resemble Libya and Tunisia. Urban subalterns contain Arab revolutions. The mobilisation, indignation, as well as ground-breaking acts of urban popular quarter residents and tensions between popular forces and state authorities, especially the police, are also discussed. The study reveals that while some countries experienced short-term reform, many reverted to authoritarian rule, highlighting the fragility of revolutionary gains.

**Keywords:** Arab Spring, Egypt, Revolution, Politics, Protest, Tunisia

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The "Arab Spring" protests began in the early months of 2011, bringing new optimism to a region with a history of autocratic governments. Since several revolutions have taken place in the Arab world, there is a lot of hope for the future of democratic transformation. The beginnings of a change have been made, even though it will be difficult to halt entirely in the years to come. Mubarak in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia, and Qaddafi in Libya are just a few of the long-time autocrats that have recently lost power in the region. The "Arab Spring" has been inspiring in part because it has been a bottom-up, grassroots movement that ordinary people have actively supported [1].

As of the time of this writing, the Syrian conflict had lasted two decades. Although the motivation for change has been great, and the durability and tenacity of authoritarian regimes are apparent, many are disappointed with the amount of progress made thus far. Syria is unquestionably the most dramatic example of an autocratic political ruler, such as Bashar al-Assad, retaining power despite huge resistance from social groups, resulting in a horrible human catastrophe. Mohammed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood were democratically elected, but both were toppled by the military, putting an end, if only temporarily, to Egypt's original experiment with representative democracy with simply a voted

administration [2].

The “Jasmine Revolution” in Tunisia in 2010 sparked the “Arab Spring,” characterized by widespread demonstrations and civil unrest across the Arab world. Named after Tunisia's national flower, the revolution was ignited by the self-immolation of 26-year-old Mohammad Bouazizi, an educated man from Sisi Bouzid who faced unemployment. He resorted to selling vegetables on the streets to support his family but was humiliated by police officers who demanded a bribe for his lack of a license. After his belongings were confiscated and he was publicly disrespected, Bouazizi attempted to file a complaint, only to be ignored. On December 17, 2010, he set himself on fire in front of the municipal building, a tragic act that was filmed and later shared on YouTube. The common people were touched off by it and flocked to the streets to demand the overthrow of the corrupt leadership after it was later posted on Facebook [3].

After twenty-eight days in office, President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali of Tunisia was ousted on January 14, 2011, sparking a wave of protests across the Middle East and North Africa that led to the removal of four major leaders in Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia. Amid civil unrest, Bashar Al-Assad in Syria sought to maintain power with Russian support. These regimes were marked by corruption, severe unemployment, and political repression. In Bahrain, demonstrations were suppressed by the Peninsular Shield Force, while in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Morocco, public dissent was silenced through concessions.

### **1.1. Egypt and Tunisia**

Tunisia and Egypt have long demonstrated a strong sense of national identity and social cohesion, contrasting with the Levant and Libya, where recognized nations emerged only after independence. Citizens of Egypt and Tunisia felt national pride, viewing their countries as products of their own histories rather than mere imperial constructs. This distinction stemmed from a legacy of centralized power, allowing citizens and government institutions to be recognized separately despite the oppressive regimes. Prior to postcolonial administrations, many dictatorships did not fully politicize state institutions and civil society, allowing them to retain some degree of independence from the ruling ideology.

The Egyptian military, despite its involvement in the regime, was able to claim that it acted in national interest due to weak political or ideological ties between the state and the regime, a division absent in countries like Syria where the ruling party and leadership were closely intertwined. During the January 2011 revolution, the Egyptian military momentarily aligned with the movement, establishing the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to assume executive authority. In contrast, Tunisia's armed forces maintained neutrality, refraining from seizing power to protect their own interests. This allowed civilian authorities to monitor the end of Ben Ali's tyranny and spared the country the disruption of a military-to-civilian power transition [4].

Mubarak's presidency dominated Egyptian politics with unchallenged military and administrative power, while Tunisia's fragmented 2011 revolt hindered collaboration on new laws due to a lack of transitional infrastructure. Civil society in Tunisia played a key role in fostering dialogue, preventing any faction from dominating, and forming committees to address corruption and human rights. The October 2011 elections saw the Islamist Nahda group winning the most votes and forming a coalition government, or "troika," with Ettakatol and the Congress for the Republic. Unlike Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Nahda did not see liberal forces as a threat. Salafis, who held significant parliamentary power in Egypt, did not participate in Tunisia's elections, aiding ideological coordination. After Ben Ali's fall, Tunisia established transition institutions such as the National Council for the Protection of the Revolution and the Supreme Authority for the Achievement of the Revolution's Objectives to manage the expanded political landscape, produc-

ing decrees on political parties, groups, and electoral rules.

Islamists and non-Islamists in Tunisia were reformists rather than revolutionaries, united in their inability to manage a swift but ineffective transition that shifted the focus from combating the nation-state to internal conflicts and polarized electoral competition. While the initial demands had unified the rebellion, the socially and politically divided revolt lacked the organizational strength and strategic cohesion to succeed without support from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF). Bayat highlighted that rebel sympathizers lacked agency and clear goals, limiting their ability to effect significant change, in contrast to the SCAF, which articulated its objectives.

### **1.2. Syria and Libya**

The uprisings in Libya and Syria did not lead to political changes similar to those in Egypt and Tunisia. Although both Gaddafi and Assad responded similarly to popular protests, the outcomes were starkly different: Assad's government has maintained unity and strength, while Gaddafi's regime quickly collapsed. Unlike most Middle Eastern countries, Assad's administration has historically conflated the identity of the Syrian state with its own, having established significant institutional and ideological ties before 2011. This stability stems from the rise of military influence and coups from 1949 to 1970, culminating in Hafez al-Assad's consolidation of power in 1970, which ended factionalism and facilitated greater power-sharing through government institutions. Hinnebusch says the presidency and Baath Party share power through the party infrastructure, military-police institution, and ministry bureaucracy [5]. Syria's senior political elite resolves inter-elite disputes and implements policy through interconnected organizations. The Ba'ath Party has infiltrated all state institutions and civil society, with its military wing politically controlling personnel. This has made Syria's political system and ruling coalition more deeply intertwined than other authoritarian Arab regimes. The coalition's integrity must therefore be protected if the government and its institutions are to survive. Other institutions attempt to preserve their co-optative capacity to thrive in such a structure [6].

Thus, all state organisations, not just the ruling party, must actively co-opt elites for the dictatorship, like in Egypt. The dictatorship "overcomes" through establishing a unified, cohesive regime, the Syrian society as well as the opposition. In a partnership like that, a coup attempt would be risky. This is why, unlike in Egypt, no government institution has taken over as President and weathered the crisis. Another crucial element of regime cohesiveness is the government's unwavering backing from both the oppressive apparatus and the tight ruling circle, a highly sectarian group that is also rigidly ruled and controlled either by the Asad clan. The presence of solid security and military units such as the Republican Guard or the Fourth Armoured Division has made this possible. Officers from the President's family, as well as members of clans like the Makhloufs, well as Shaleeshs, command their carefully chosen leaders.

### **1.3. Reflections from Morocco on the "Arab Spring"**

European colonial activity in North Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries extended state power to unprecedented levels and changed the intellectual, financial, and social milieu in which collective identity is formed. This addresses the developments. Since January, the "Jasmine Revolution" in Tunisia and the "Arab Spring" have changed my writing environment. From Bahrain to Morocco, democratic upheavals have rattled established administrations in the past four months. The current upheaval could reshape a post-World War II state order. The newest game-changing events include a terrorist attack at Marrakesh's Jmaa al-Fna, Morocco's most popular tourist attraction, as well as the murder of Osama bin Laden by American Navy seals.

#### 1.4. Results of the “Arab Spring”

Since the “Arab Spring” began in late 2010, over a decade has passed, with ongoing political turmoil in many cities where revolutions occurred. While Tunisia and Egypt saw varied democratic outcomes post-authoritarianism, Syria and Libya faced armed conflict, with Assad remaining in power. Factors such as socioeconomic conditions, ethnic diversity, political legacies, and transitional decisions shaped these outcomes. The initial protests in Tunisia ignited widespread uprisings, advocating for human dignity and social justice. Meanwhile, countries like Morocco and Jordan utilized economic incentives and religious discourse, supported by Saudi Arabia and Gulf states, to stave off similar reforms during Egypt and Tunisia’s upheaval. Most Middle Eastern countries were ruled by long-standing dictatorships, with the Arab Spring primarily resulting in the ouster of these autocrats. Some leaders attempted to disguise their authoritarian regimes as democratic through rigged elections. President Ben Ali of Tunisia was the first to step down due to the upheaval sparked by the Arab Spring. He remained in power for about 23 years until being forced to resign on January 14, 2011, as a result of growing opposition brought on by the financial crisis [7].

After a state of emergency was declared in Tunis, Prime Minister took on the role of acting President as Ben Ali fled to Saudi Arabia. Libya soon experienced similar turmoil, with protests against long-time dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. Unlike other Arab leaders, Qaddafi was not seen as a Western puppet; he focused on improving national interests and sharing the country’s wealth. However, despite his efforts to maintain control, widespread demonstrations in Libya ultimately failed to overthrow his regime. His mercenaries and regular troops both attempted to conceal the incident, but they failed. Additionally, a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) attacked the nation under the guise of defending civilians and those defending democracy an authoritarian dictator [8]. The National Transitional Council and NATO forces discovered Qaddafi on October 20, 2011, he was injured while hiding in a complex, and he died the same day. This was a terrible and awful finish for Qaddafi [9].

The revolution that began in Tunis travelled across Libya and then made its way to Egypt. Hosni Mubarak was serving as Egypt’s President at the time, and he was firmly in control of the country. The January 25, 2011 was observed in Egypt as National Police Day, and on that day, a lot of Egyptians joined together to transform the day into a protest day [10]. These peaceful protesters were influenced by the country’s pervasive corruption, widespread injustice, deteriorating economic conditions, ongoing state of emergency, overzealous use of emergency powers by the Home Ministry and Police, and President Hosni Mubarak’s authoritarian rule over the past thirty years [11]. The demonstration that was first staged by a tiny group of activists has developed into an all-American movement. The actions Mubarak took to placate the protesters included appointing Omer Suleiman was his vice president in January 29, replacing the current cabinet with such a new one on January 31, and announcing that he and his son Gamal would not run in the following presidential election were unsuccessful [12]. Mubarak was compelled to step down on February 11, 2011, because of large protests. Following the dissolution of the legislature and suspension of the Constitution, Tantawi’s Supreme Council of Armed Forces assumed control of the situation.

## 2. Review of Literature

Charles Krauthammer (2005), in his book “The Arab Spring of 2005,” investigated that the historical significance of the protests is captured by the “Arab Spring” and “Arab 1989” analogies, although such historical significance also contains some inaccuracies. Indirectly describing Rather than by its objectives,

participants, or their range of motives, the phenomena based on a democratic dialectics that is still unclear is referred to by “Arab Spring” was used by US traditionalists in 2005-06 to characterise a blossoming of Arab democratic movements [6].

Charles Tilly (2008), in his book “Contentious performances,” stated that revolts are not revolutions; revolts, rebellions, and uprisings simply refer to the ongoing opposition to the prevailing political order and socio-economic, whereas revolutions involve the swift, violent, and long-lasting destruction of such a system and its replacement with a new one. Therefore, revolutionary results, or the actual downfall of an existing order, must be differentiated by revolutionary conditions or the latter times of significant fracture in state power. The word “full-fledged revolution” then refers to any significant blending of both [13].

According to Sami Zubaida (2011), in his book “The “Arab Spring” in Historical Perspective,” many things pointed to the wisdom of listening to Braudel’s caution against the traps of event-based history, or *l’histoire événementielle*, which kindled the first fire. Optimism in the emergence of Middle Eastern democracy quickly started to dwindle with the swift, unexpected removal of Muhammad Usn Mubarak and Zayn al-bidn bin Al in Tunisia in Egypt. The governments in Tripoli, Manama, Damascus, “an,” and other regimes are stronger than projected. Republicanism, nationalism, socialism, and communism included pan-Arabism. After being repeatedly outlawed by Arab despots with Western complicity, Islamism emerged from the shadows to grab the leadership of popular uprisings and moments of transformation [14].

As stated, Marwan Bishara (2012), in his book “The Invisible Arab: The promise and peril of the Arab revolutions,” defends against such US-centered readings of the Arab uprisings. The impassioned yet carelessly written narrative of what he refers to as an Arab revolution may be found in “The Invisible Arab: The Promise and Peril of the Arab Revolutions” by Bishara(s). “The Invisible Arab,” who has suffered has come to hate both local autocratic governments and the neoliberal global economic system as a result of the “sadistic paternalism” of Western-backed military dictatorships. Al-Jazeera host Bishara claims that the rise of religious organisations, women’s organisations, labour unions, and community organisers in the early 2000s in Tunisia and Egypt were essential in forging a new Arab identity [15].

As stated by Mary Kaldor (2013) her book “Civil Society in 1989 and 2011,” many have also drawn parallels between the “Arab Spring” and other pivotal epochs in the democratisation of Europe, such as the Nation’s Springs of 1848, the Prague Spring of 1968, and the upheavals of 1989. The subsequent discussion of the parallels as well as distinctions of 1848/1968 or 1989 focused on whether the uprisings would succeed in bringing about true democratic transitions In an area that has long been regarded as an outlier in the worldwide tendencies toward democracy, or if it would instead fall victim to revanchist reconsolidations [16].

As stated, Abdul and Muhammad (2017), in their work “Arab spring: Its causes and consequences,” claimed the circumstances that led to the uprisings in the Arab states of the Middle East. It also looks into how social media was used during these events and how that affected how news about what happened during these protests was disseminated. It also includes the fact that these revolutions and civil conflicts led to the overthrow of long-time autocratic rulers in Tunis, Libya, and Egypt as well as the granting of some social and economic rights to inhabitants in Oman, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, as well as Bahrain [17].

### 3. Conclusion

The political landscape of the Middle East is marked by significant upheaval, especially following Moha-



med Bouazizi's death in Tunisia, which ignited the "Arab Spring." This movement led to regime changes in Egypt and Tunisia, NATO's intervention to remove Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh's resignation in Yemen. However, the aftermath of these changes remains uncertain, particularly regarding state-society interactions. Despite the removal of some leaders, the institutions and power structures supporting them, such as secret police and crony capitalists, persist. Ewan Stein observes that the idealistic vision of Tahrir Square has been marred by the complex realities that followed. George Lawson highlights three critical points regarding the Arab Spring's aftermath: first, few movements lead to effective revolutions, with many regimes still successfully suppressing dissent; second, modern revolutionaries often have reasonable goals, shifting from state-driven revolutions to societal transformation; and third, there is a lack of cohesive revolutionary ideology among various factions. While Egypt and Tunisia continue to inspire hope, with many believing in a transition to democracy, Yemen faces civil war, and other Arab nations maintain unchanged ruling classes. The rise of Islamism complicates the political landscape, with Islamist parties' positions influencing state-society dynamics. Ennahda in Tunisia, with its reformist strategy, is better positioned than the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which faced repression after the 2013 coup. This comparison underscores how strategies and organizational strength determine the prospects for democracy. The Arab Spring sparked a wave of hope for change, yet the journey toward democracy and effective governance remains fraught with challenges. The interactions between state and society, the role of Islamist movements, and the enduring influence of entrenched power structures will shape the region's political future.

## References

1. Bayat A. The Arab Spring and its surprises. *Dev Change*. 2013;44(3):587-601.
2. Lesch DW. The unknown future of Syria. *Mediterr Polit*. 2013;18(1):97-103.
3. Kuznetsov V. The Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the birth of the Arab Spring uprisings. In: *Handbook of revolutions in the 21st century: The new waves of revolutions, and the causes and effects of disruptive political change*. Cham: Springer International Publishing; 2022. p. 625-649.
4. Bellin E. Reconsidering the robustness of authoritarianism in the Middle East: Lessons from the Arab Spring. *Comp Polit*. 2012;44(2):127-149.
5. Hinnebusch R. *Syria: Revolution from above*. Routledge; 2004.
6. Krauthammer C. The Arab Spring of 2005. *The Seattle Times*. Seattle, WA; 2005;21.
7. Ryan Y. How Tunisia's revolution began. *Al Jazeera*. 2011 Jan 26.
8. MacFarquhar N. An erratic leader, brutal and defiant to the end. *The New York Times*. 2011 Oct 20.
9. Shadid K, Fahim A, Gladstone R. Qaddafi dies in Libya, marking an era's violent end. *The New York Times*. 2011 Oct 20.
10. Asser M. The Muammar Gaddafi story. *BBC News*. 2011;21.
11. McGreal C, Shenker J. Hosni Mubarak resigns – and Egypt celebrates a new dawn. *The Guardian*. 2011 Feb 11.
12. Kirkpatrick DD. Egypt erupts in jubilation as Mubarak steps down. *New York Times*. 2011 Feb 11.
13. Tilly C. *Contentious performances*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2008.
14. Zubaida S. *The "Arab Spring" in historical perspective*. Open Democracy. 2011.
15. Bishārah M. *The invisible Arab: The promise and peril of the Arab revolutions*. No Title. 2012.
16. Kaldor M, Moore HL, Selchow S. *Global civil society 2012: Ten years of critical reflection*. 2012.
17. QadirMushtaq A, Afzal M. Arab Spring: Its causes and consequences. *J Punjab Univ Hist Soc*.

2017;30(1):1-10.



Licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/)