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The Fall of Tunisia, Last of the Arab Spring Nations



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“Do you remember the tomorrow that never came?” asked a sad piece of street graffiti in Cairo, referring to the fate of the Arab Spring that once promised to overthrow the brutal autocracies that rule the Middle East.

That tomorrow moved even further into the future this week when a coup displaced the last surviving democracy to emerge from the Arab uprising of 2011. Appropriately, it took place in Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began a decade ago after a vegetable seller burned himself to death in a protest against the actions of the corrupt and dictatorial regime.

On 25 July, Kais Saied, the Trump-like populist president of Tunisia, sacked the prime minister, suspended parliament and declared himself prosecutor general. As with Donald

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Trump, he had spent the years since he was elected in 2019 blaming members of parliament, critical media and government institutions for the dire state of the country. Polls show that many Tunisians believe him.

The takeover of power has been called “a constitutional coup” because Saied, a law professor by profession, was already president, but decisive steps towards autocracy are being taken. By now this road to dictatorship is well-travelled in many countries and the Tunisian coup is only the concluding episode in the tragic saga of the Arab Spring. Almost every state in the Middle East and North Africa has now returned to – or never left – the political dark ages from which, not so long ago, they thought they might be emerging.

There was nothing phoney about the Arab Spring in its first phases, though western media coverage was over-optimistic about the chances of success. Spontaneous uprisings spread from Tunisia to Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria. People poured onto the streets chanting slogans like: “Bread! Freedom! Social Justice! The people demand the fall of the regime!”

And regimes did fall or falter as television screens worldwide were filled with pictures of protesters battling police in Tahrir Square in Cairo and Libyan militiamen fighting Muammar Gaddafi’s soldiers on the road to Benghazi. The scenes looked like something out of *Les Misérables*, with the revolutionary populace struggling against the forces of oppression.

In many ways this was true enough, but the chances of victory were always less than they appeared. At first, the demonstrators had the advantage of surprise because the sclerotic regimes that they were seeking to overthrow had never before faced mass protests on such a scale. The powers-that-be used enough violence to enrage, but not enough to intimidate. There was much wishful thinking about how social media had outflanked and marginalised official propaganda.

The greatest triumph of the Arab Spring was in Egypt with its 90m population, where President Hosni Mubarak was removed after 29 years in power. Astonished by their achievement, the revolutionaries did not grasp its limitations. They never took over state institutions, notably the Egyptian army, which in July 2013 staged a military coup with popular support and established an even more oppressive regime than that of Mubarak.

One by one, the countries that briefly dreamed of a bright future in 2011 saw their hopes extinguished. In Bahrain, the Sunni monarchy ferociously stamped out demonstrations by the Shia majority, torturing doctors who had treated the injured and claiming, without any evidence, that the protests were orchestrated by Iran.

The outcome of the Arab Spring was uniformly disastrous in that in the six countries where it took hold the situation is worse than before. In three of them – Libya, Syria and Yemen – civil wars, all fuelled and manipulated by outside powers, are raging and show no sign of ending. Governments in Egypt and Bahrain, which is effectively a proxy of Saudi Arabia, ruthlessly crush any signs of dissent. Predictably, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have both welcomed the presidential coup in Tunisia.

I reported and wrote about all these uprisings at the time and in subsequent years. I was never optimistic that all would turn out well, but sitting in Cairo after the fall of Mubarak 10 years ago and trying to decide if I should cover the revolution in Benghazi or the one in Bahrain, it was impossible not to be caught up in the heady atmosphere of a new day dawning.

Even then I suspected that the old regimes were not going to disappear tamely. My minor skirmishes with the Egyptian bureaucracy convinced me that they were still waiting for a clear winner in the power struggle. In Libya, after Gaddafi had been killed, it was telling that one of the first proposals of the transitional government was to end the ban on polygamy.

I have asked myself ever since if the millions who demonstrated during the Arab Spring could have won or was the balance of power always too skewed against them. The answer to this question is vital if there is ever to be a second revolutionary wave more successful than the first.

Outside the Middle East, the vision of the forces at play 10 years ago was always naive, pitting “evil doers” against the good-and-the-true. Almost from the beginning, the Arab Spring was a peculiar mix of revolution and counter-revolution. Genuine popular uprisings took place in Libya and Syria, for instance, but it was absurd to imagine that Saudi Arabia, UAE and Qatar, the Sunni absolute monarchies of the Gulf, were giving vast sums of money to the parties and militias they supported in order to spread secularism, democracy and freedom of expression.

Anti-regime movements in their dealing with the West would sensibly downplay their religious and ethnic allegiances and adopt the vocabulary of liberal democracy. Usually they were taken uncritically at their word. Iraqi opposition to Saddam Hussein before the US-led invasion in 2003 blamed all sectarian hatreds on him, and the opponents of Bashar al-Assad did much the same after 2011. But in both countries, the military frontlines commonly mirror the religious and ethnic loyalties of local communities.

Western politicians who led the military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq likewise pretend that one of their prime motives was to spread parliamentary democracy and personal freedom. But my experience of reporting these interventions was that they were not much different from 19th-century imperial ventures, and served to exacerbate divisions and spread chaos.

The first uprising in Tunisia provoked vast international interest, but the presidential coup in the same country last Sunday scarcely registered on the news agenda. This is a mistake even from the most nationally egocentric point of view because a great band of human misery now stretches more than 3,000 miles from Kabul to Tunis and 2,000 miles from Damascus to Mogadishu.

This vast zone of deprivation, dictatorship and violence may regenerate Isis or lead to rise of new al-Qaeda-type organisations. It will certainly produce great surges of refugees once again heading for Europe because they see no future for themselves in their own countries.

Patrick Cockburn is the author of [War in the Age of Trump](#) (Verso).

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