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The Nation

The Great Arab Revolt

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The Arab world's presidents for life and absolute monarchs are quaking in the aftermath of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Arab politics had been stuck in a vast logjam for the past thirty years, from which its crowds are now attempting to blast it loose. The protesters put their fingers on the phenomenon of the vampire state and concluded that before anything important could change, they had to put a stake through its heart.

Under European colonialism the Middle East had a few decades of classic liberal rule in the first half of the twentieth century. Egypt, Iraq and Iran had elected parliaments, prime ministers and popular parties. However, liberal rule was eventually discredited insofar as it proved to be largely a game played by big landlords overly open to the influence and bribery of grasping Western powers.

From about the 1950s, the modern one-party states of the Middle East justified themselves through the struggle for independence from those Western colonial empires and the corrupt parliamentary regimes. They undertook land reform, developed big public sectors and promoted state-led industrialization. In recent decades, however, each ruling party, backed by a nationalist officer corps, increasingly became little more than an appendage of the president for life and his extended clan. The massive networks of informers and secret police worked for the interests of the central executive.

These governments took steps in recent decades toward neoliberal policies of privatization and a smaller public sector under pressure from Washington and allied institutions—and the process was often corrupt. The ruling families used their prior knowledge of important economic policy initiatives to engage in a kind of insider trading, advantaging their relatives and buddies.

The wife of Tunisian dictator Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the notorious former hairdresser Leila Ben Ali, placed her relatives in key business positions enabled by insider government knowledge and licenses that allowed them to dominate the country. The US Embassy in Tunis estimated in 2006 that half the major entrepreneurs in the country were related by blood or marriage to the president. In Egypt, Ahmed Ezz, for example, benefited from his high position in the ruling National Democratic Party and his friendship with Hosni Mubarak's son Gamal. Ezz has been formally charged with usurping control of a government-owned steel concern and of rerouting its products to his own, privately owned Ezz Steel company. In the past decade, Ezz went from controlling 35 percent of the Egyptian steel market to over 60 percent, raising a chorus of accusations of monopoly practices. Since the Mubaraks rigged the elections so that the NDP always won, and the party officials favored by the president prospered, Egypt was ruled by a closed elite.

The policies of these one-party states created widespread anxiety among workers, the unemployed and even entrepreneurs outside the charmed circle, seeming to create an insuperable obstacle to the advancement of the ordinary person. Everyone could be taken advantage of or even expropriated at will by corrupt state elites, who had the backing of the secret police. Workers' strikes were crushed by security police. The presidents even began putting on regal airs and grooming their sons as successors, ensuring that the family cartels and cronyism would continue into the next generation.

The one-party states also pursued distorted development goals. Among their few achievements was the reduction of infant mortality. They put tremendous sums into universities and higher education but inexplicably neglected K–12 education for the rural and urban poor. The result was large numbers of young villagers, slum dwellers and workers with limited opportunities for advancement, and phalanxes of unemployed college graduates.

Fear of the perpetuation of a closed economic and power elite drove Tunisians and Egyptians to focus on driving the Ben Alis and Mubaraks from power. The narrowness of the dominant cliques had disgusted even the regular army officer corps, who in any case were close to the people because they commanded conscript armies. When the crowds came out so determinedly, they declared their neutrality.

Other regional mafia states have scrambled to mollify their publics. Ali Abdullah Saleh, the strongman who has ruled Yemen since 1978, announced that he would not run for yet another term in 2013, and that no attempt would be made to install his son after him. He was trying to deflect the severe criticisms of his nepotism (his half-brother is head of the air force, and nephews are highly placed in the security apparatus). These pledges were

code for ending the dominance of the state and economy by relatives and friends of Saleh.

The nepotism and corruption of the ruling clique in Yemen is all the more explosive because the country is already deeply divided. The tribal north has a different history from the south, which had a lively worker movement and even, briefly, a communist government before Saleh forcibly unified the two in 1990. Religious and tribal rebellions, as with the Zaydi Shiite Houthis in the north and a radical Islamist tendency in the rural south, make Yemen anything but stable. The country's declining petroleum revenues and its increasing water crisis make the economic pie even smaller, increasing public disgust with the Saleh cartel. Having the government and the economy in the hands of an unrepresentative and greedy clique is a recipe for further unrest.

Likewise, Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki said he would not seek another term; his opponents have charged him with operating secret torture cells and a private army, and aspiring to become another corrupt strongman. Since Iraq's petroleum riches are in government hands, it would be easy for a few key cabinet members to use them for sectional and even private purposes, a source of constant anxiety among Iraq's suffering populace, which lacks electricity and even, often, potable water.

Algeria's corrupt state petroleum elite, represented by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, is also being targeted by street crowds. The country's ruling generals had allowed a Muslim fundamentalist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, to run in the 1991 parliamentary elections, on the theory that it would not win. When the fundamentalists took a two-thirds majority, the generals canceled the runoff and threw the country into a vicious civil war between secular urban elites and lower-middle-class or rural fundamentalists that took an estimated 150,000 lives. Because the generals won the civil war, and the army stands behind the regime, it is harder for the urban crowds to gain traction. In Tunisia and Egypt, there was no similar history of rancor between people and army, and no fear on the part of the officer corps that they would be tried and executed if the government was overthrown. In addition, the Algerian petroleum state, like the Gulf oil monarchies, has the resources to bribe much of the public into quiescence or to deploy well-paid and loyal security forces when the bribe does not work (as seems to be the case in Bahrain, where the Sunni monarchy has chosen violent repression of the restive Shiite majority).

In Egypt and Tunisia, once the ruling families were gone, the interim governments promptly froze the accounts of regime cronies and in many instances initiated legal proceedings against them. Seeing the writing on the wall, the ambitious resigned en masse from the now notorious former ruling party; the RCD in Tunisia was dissolved altogether.

Many among the demonstrators, whether union organizers, villagers or college graduates, seem to believe that once the lead log in the logjam is removed, the economy will return to normal and opportunities for advancement will open up to all. Somewhat touchingly, they have put their hopes in free and fair parliamentary elections, so that the Middle East may be swinging back to a new liberal period, formally resembling that of the 1930s and

'40s. If these aspirations for open politics and economic opportunity are blocked again, as they were by the hacienda owners and Western proconsuls of the mid-twentieth century, the Arab masses may turn to more desperate, and dangerous, alternatives.