

THE ARAB SPRING

Causes and consequences for Africa



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Table of contents

Timeline	1
Introduction	2
Tunisia: The Jasmine revolution	2
The rise of social media	2
The Egyptian revolution	2
The Libyan civil war	3
South African foreign policy and Libya	3
International overlap	4
Implications	4
State level	4
Regional level	4
International politics	4
Criticisms of foreign reactions	5
Africa after the Arab Spring	5
Main sources	6

List of abbreviations

AU – African Union
Brics – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa
Nato – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NTC – National Transitional Council
SMC – Supreme Military Council
UN – United Nations
UNSC – United Nations Security Council

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Timeline

Date	Country	Event
December 19, 2010	Tunisia	Mohamed Bouazizi self-immolates prompting mass protest.
January 7, 2011	Algeria	Riots occur in Algeria over unemployment and high food prices.
January 9, 2011	Tunisia	Protests continue in Tunisia leading to several deaths in violent clashes.
January 14, 2011	Tunisia	President Ben-Ali bows to protest and flees to Saudi Arabia.
January 14, 2011	Tunisia	Muammar Gaddafi condemns Tunisia uprising.
January 24, 2011	Tunisia	France offers aid to Tunisia interim government.
January 25, 2011	Egypt	Mass protests occur against the Mubarak regime.
January 26, 2011	Egypt	Security forces crack down on protestors.
February 3, 2011	Egypt	Thousands of protestors participate in "day of rage" against government.
February 4, 2011	Egypt	"Day of departure" protest in Tahrir Square.
February 11, 2011	Egypt	Mubarak resigns.
February 16, 2011	Libya	Antigovernment protests in Benghazi.
February 17, 2011	Libya	"Day of rage", 15 people dead.
February 18, 2011	Libya	Gaddafi supporters attack protestors killing dozens.
February 20, 2011	Libya	Protests spread to Tripoli.
February 23, 2011	Yemen	Protests begin in the capital Sana'a.
February 26, 2011	Libya	The UNSC votes to refer Gaddafi to the International Criminal Court for war crimes.
February 27, 2011	Tunisia	Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi resigns amid clashes between police and protestors.
March 5, 2011	Libya	Gaddafi launches a massive counterattack.
March 9, 2011	Tunisia	Ben-Ali's party dissolved.
March 18, 2011	Libya	UNSC votes for Resolution 1973 authorising all necessary measures to protect civilians from attack.
March 20, 2011	Morocco	Thousands march against corruption.
March 21, 2011	Egypt	77% of Egyptians vote for a blueprint for parliamentary and presidential elections.
April 8, 2011	Egypt	100 000 protestors gather in Tahrir Square putting pressure on the Military Council to meet their demands.
April 22, 2011	Libya	Rebels take Misrata.
June 20, 2011	Tunisia	Ben-Ali sentenced to 35 years in jail.
July 13, 2011	Egypt	Military Council postpones elections.
August 1, 2011	Egypt	Military forces violently retake Tahrir Square.
August 26, 2011	Libya	Rebels take control of Tripoli.
October 20, 2011	Libya	Gaddafi killed in Sirte.

Introduction

On December 17, 2010, a Tunisian street vendor, named Mohammed Bouazizi, set himself alight in protest at harassment and humiliation that he received at the hands of government officials. His self-immolation served as the catalyst that galvanised the population to embark on a revolution against long-serving leader Zine El Abidine Ben Ali after 23 years in power. The toppling of Ben Ali was to have great ramifications for not only Tunisia, but for the region as a whole, as waves of protests spread throughout the Arab world resulting in regime change in Egypt and Libya.

This report seeks to provide insight into some of the root causes of what came to be known as the Arab Spring and to analyse the consequences that the uprisings have had on the political dynamic in Africa, with particular focus on the political dynamic within continental body – the African Union (AU), as well as the regional dynamic within the Arab League. By investigating the characteristics of each country that experienced regime change, it is possible to identify certain trends that will help to predict whether an Arab Spring-like uprising is possible in other African countries on the basis of shared or similar traits. In doing so, the report looks into the cases where regime change has occurred, specifically Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Although these States are not archetypal, a closer look into their political systems and culture, combined with the regional dynamics, may provide important clues as to why revolutions occurred in these countries.

Before proceeding it is important to note that the Arab Spring is a new and evolving phenomenon. There are no definitive truths regarding the events still occurring in the region and the full consequences are yet to be seen, as at the time of writing Egypt awaits a presidential election amid conflict between the civilian population and the Supreme Military Council (SMC), while Libya awaits an election that many hope promises civil governance after a drawn out civil war resulting in the death of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi. Further, Syria is locked in a violent struggle between protestors and President Bashar al-Assad. One should bear in mind that the situation in the region is volatile and unpredictable and should therefore, given the time of writing, be taken in context.

In analysing each specific uprising that resulted in regime change, namely Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, it is possible to identify characteristics that combined to result in popular protest and thereafter revolution.

Tunisia: The Jasmine revolution

The Tunisian revolution is regarded as the catalyst for the wave of protests that swept across the Arab world towards the end of 2010, into 2011 and beyond. As mentioned, the self-immolation of Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, served to ignite the Tunisian revolution, which was remarkably swift considering that Ben Ali resigned as president 28 days later on January 14, 2011.

It is difficult to pinpoint a single grievance that drove the Tunisian protestors to take to the streets against the Ben Ali government. Rather a combination of socioeconomic factors, including high levels of unemployment, increasing inflation, high food prices, government corruption and a general lack of political freedoms, such as free speech and general civil liberties, led to a point where the people of Tunisia were no longer able, or willing, to live under a regime that deprived them of many basic rights and, which promised no adequate reforms.

If these can be considered as the factors imposed by the system of governance, in other words the external and structural pressures exerted by the governance system, there were also internal pressures that speak mainly to class, culture and social wellbeing. There is an internal explanation, which when combined with the structural one, explains why the Tunisian people rose up against their own government.

An important factor is that this was not a revolution comprising mainly poor, uneducated people, but rather a large, educated middle class, which is borne out by Tunisia's relatively high literacy rate of 74.3%. From this figure, one can deduce that one of the motivating factors of the uprising was the lack of opportunity for young Tunisians leaving school and entering either higher education institutions or the wider economy. The official unemployment rate in Tunisia prior to the revolution was 14% of which 52% were young people, indicating the desperate plight of the country's graduates and lack of employment opportunities.

The rise of social media

One of the major mobilising factors that led not just to the Tunisian revolution but the entire Arab Spring phenomenon was the use of communication technology and more specifically, social media. Social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, have made communication and, hence mobilisation, a lot easier in society. As mentioned before, this was not a revolution of the poor, but rather, predominantly, a middle class that had access to these avenues of technology.

The use of blogs and video-sharing websites, proved to be highly effective tools for connecting the Tunisian people with what was happening on the ground. Witnesses to State violence and attacks would video the incidents on their cell phones and upload them onto the Internet, thus allowing the world's population to bear witness to the atrocities the Tunisian people were subjected to at the hands of Ben-Ali's security forces.

It did not take long, however, for Ben-Ali's regime to catch wind of the threat social media posed to the regime, as in January 2011, the government began to launch cyber attacks on people's emails and Facebook accounts. The attacks would steal user's login information whenever they tried to log in. Facebook acted promptly and implemented new software that would help to prevent such attacks.

Ben-Ali's heavy-handed methods of attempting to muzzle social media reflects the importance that the information-sharing sites had in contributing to galvanising populations and to the downfall of this regime.

The Egyptian revolution

Following the overthrow of Tunisia's President Ben Ali, events in Egypt began to follow a similar path to that of the Jasmine revolution. The most populous country in the Arab world erupted in mass protest on January 25, 2011, in response to the heavy-handed rule of President Hosni Mubarak. What followed were 18 days of unrest in the capital Cairo's Tahrir Square, resulting in the eventual resignation of Mubarak on February 11, effectively ending 30 years of autocratic rule.

Although many of the catalysts that caused the Tunisian revolution can be found in the Egyptian case, there is a strong sense that the Egyptian revolution was a long time coming. This was evident through the culture

of protest in Egyptian society that had gathered momentum from the early 1990s. These protest movements have their roots in pro-Palestinian groups, trade unionism and wider civil society. However, they were never able to fully gain the impetus to create a serious threat to the Mubarak regime, owing to a culture of fear instilled by the former president's security and police forces.

It was thus the domino effect of the Tunisian revolution, as well as the power of social media that transmitted what was happening on the ground to the widest possible audience, which eventually gave the Egyptian people the impetus they needed to collectively challenge Mubarak.

If Tunisia can be seen as a model for how a country should respond to calls for regime change, Egypt reflects a drawn out battle that has evolved from a civil struggle against an autocratic president long reliant on the military to back up his resistance to calls for reform, to a crisis of civil-military relations. One of the key factors that drove Mubarak from power was his loss of support and trust by the military. After the resignation of Mubarak, the Supreme Council assumed power and promised the Egyptian people to only rule for a defined transitional period, while facilitating general elections paving the way for civilian rule.

The Egyptian people, however, became increasingly impatient with the Supreme Council, and were suspicious of their intentions. As a result, protestors once again took to Tahrir Square to voice their discontent with the transitional regime, calling for early elections in late 2011. The armed forces responded with a violent crackdown that drew condemnation from human rights groups, as well as the international community.

Perhaps the most significant example of protest against transitional military rule was the tragedy that took place in the coastal town of Port Said, on February 1, 2012. The incident occurred when soccer fans invaded the pitch after Al-Masry defeated Al Ahli, causing a stampede and violent clashes with riot police. The incident resulted in over 1 000 injuries and 74 dead and was construed by the public to be the result of heavy-handedness by the security forces. In retaliation a series of protests outside the Interior Ministry occurred, resulting in a tense standoff between protestors and the riot police.

After parliamentary elections in late January, which saw the previously banned Muslim Brotherhood dominate, the country awaits a presidential election scheduled for June 2012. The election is intended to be the final step in the transition from military rule to civilian governance. It is likely that a candidate from the Muslim Brotherhood will win the presidency, giving the party political power. The task of governing and managing the expectations of the Egyptian people will prove to be challenging, especially after months of instability and protest.

The Libyan civil war

Civil protests in Libya were met with fierce resistance from Gaddafi security forces on a level that was not experienced in Tunisia or Egypt. This can be attributed to the fact that Gaddafi had full control of the Libya's security forces, while in the case of Tunisia and Egypt divided loyalties (or lack thereof) to the incumbent regime played a significant role to its downfall. The Libyan forces were so heavy handed in their response to the protestors, that their actions sparked a brutal civil war between Gaddafi loyalists and anti-Gaddafi rebels who organised themselves into the National Transitional Council (NTC).

What stood out in the Libyan case was the influence of the international community, which saw the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) throw their weight behind the NTC, resulting in military air support in the establishment of a no-fly zone under Resolution 1973. The UNSC adopted the resolution with ten in favor, including South Africa, and five abstaining from the vote. Effectively, the Resolution authorised 'all necessary measures' to protect civilians in Libya and demanded an immediate ceasefire.

What resulted was a bitter, drawn out civil war between pro-Gaddafi forces and the NTC. As the war wore on for most of 2011, Gaddafi became more and more desperate as the NTC began to control more territory, including Gaddafi strongholds, such as Misrata and Sirte. In August the capital, Tripoli, was captured, with Gaddafi himself evading capture and sparking all sorts of rumors about his wellbeing and whereabouts. He was eventually captured and killed attempting to escape from Sirte. Subsequently, the NTC officially declared the end of the war on October 23, 2011, and the liberation of Libya. The NTC was recognised by the United Nations (UN) as the legal representative of Libya.

Libya currently awaits a general election to ensure civilian rule. Despite Gaddafi's death, however, tribal conflict remains in the country, especially in the West where ethnic conflict has rendered the State largely unstable in the post-Gaddafi era.

South African foreign policy and Libya

South African foreign policy, with regard to the Libyan situation, has left a number of analysts confused about the country's political alignment. Initially South Africa voted for Resolution 1973 enforcing the no-fly zone over Libya. This firmly aligned South Africa with the Western powers, namely the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato) powers – the US, Britain and France, and not with its Brics partners (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Specifically China and Russia abstained from the UNSC vote.

Following the passing of the Resolution, South Africa almost immediately withdrew its support for the motion, heavily criticising the Nato campaign and accusing it of undermining efforts to find an African solution to the problem through the AU.

It is difficult to explain the mixed signals sent by South Africa's Department of International Relations and Cooperation. According to Foreign Policy online, the country "is [experiencing] a kind of stress response to the clash between its two identities on the global stage – the moral beacon, the conscience of the world and human rights campaigner; and the emerging regional superpower, the 'S' newly added to the end of the designation for the world's new rising powers, the 'Brics'". It would probably bring some clarity to consider that South Africa also has economic ties to the Western powers, which until recently were its largest trading partners. China is gradually becoming more important to the country's economy.

In sum, as soon as South Africa voted to support the no-fly zone in Libya, the government felt insecure about advocating for regime change on moral grounds. It certainly also felt compelled to push an African agenda, by advocating the use of channels within the AU to deal with the situation, as

a response to what many were calling a form of neocolonialism driven by the Western powers.

Another important point is that there was no joint coordination in policy by the Arab League and the AU. Instead the Arab League was more aligned to Nato forces, allowing them to use the league's air spaces to launch attacks into Libya to protect civilians.

International overlap

The international response to the Arab Spring crises has been varied, with most countries condemning State violence on civilians. The almost universal condemnation of the violence in the affected countries, however, stopped short of intervention except for the Libyan case. Although Nato took the lead in enforcing the no-fly zone over the country, a complex dynamic of international politics was evident that reflected elements of regionalism, evident in the Arab League's and the AU's stances, with regard to issues of State sovereignty and interventionism.

The AU collectively condemned the aggressive Nato interventionist strategy by painting it as a form of neocolonialism and strongly advocated an African solution to an African problem, which involved meetings between Gaddafi and a number of African Statesmen, including South African President Jacob Zuma, to no avail.

According to the Iran Review, the international actors in the Arab Spring revolutions can be classified into two categories – organisations that carried out their original mandates, and organisations that merely acted as regional mechanisms. Organisations in the first category are classified as those which have fulfilled their original missions as per their statutes, including the UN, Nato and the European Union. The latter category includes those organisations whose policies towards issues pertaining to the Arab Spring were representative of conflicting international demands to play an effective role in global developments. These include the Arab League and the AU, which are described as being largely ineffectual.

Implications

The Arab Spring is set to have a ripple effect, not only for those States that experienced regime change and increased protest, but also for the Arab world, the African continent as a whole and the international political landscape. These different dimensions are explored and analysed to provide an accurate picture of the post-Arab Spring world.

State level

It is a bit too early to predict what the internal implications will be for those countries that experienced uprisings, however, it is expected that a peaceful and stable outcome will depend on how those specific countries can manage the change from transitional to civilian rule. Tunisia has managed to do this fairly successfully, holding peaceful elections on October 23, 2011, which have resulted in a smooth handover of power.

The Egyptian case has not been as smooth, with pockets of protest occurring around the country in frustration at the delay of elections and epitomizing the fear that the country's military rulers may hold onto power. The Port Said soccer tragedy in which 74 people lost their lives is most notable. Rioting was initially over team performance, but thereafter changed to protest against the country's military rulers in frustration over the pace of the handover of power to civilians. It is the dynamic of these civil-military relations on which the political stability of Egypt hangs.

Egypt is also currently going through a process of electoral reform, with a number of candidates being disqualified or banned from entering the presidential election race based on their previous links with the Mubarak regime. Despite the anti-Mubarak public sentiment in Egypt, critics argue that excluding any candidate from the electoral race is undemocratic and merely revisits Mubarak's exclusionary policies. Whether these candidates will be included in the upcoming election is yet to be decided.

Libya is in the planning stage of hosting general elections, which is an important step on the road towards democracy and civilian rule. There are, however, reports of tribal violence, as well as pockets of pro-Gaddafi supporters still fighting, which may serve as a hindrance to successful elections.

Regional level

The overthrow of governments in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya had a number of regional effects, which had a bearing on the internal politics of a number of States within North Africa and the Arab region as a whole. Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Oman and Saudi Arabia experienced protests that followed much the same pattern as the countries that experienced revolution, with protestors calling for political reform and an end to corruption. These protests, however, were met with promises of domestic reform and simmered down before significant damage was inflicted on the incumbent regimes.

Syria and Bahrain too experienced increased levels of protest at the time. These protests, however, coincided with sectarian conflict and religious upheaval. Further, particularly in Syria, President Al-Assad cracked down hard on the protestors, which resulted in a number of civilian deaths that were largely condemned by civil society and the international community. The spillover effects of the conflicts in the region have also been concerning, with a perceived deterioration of State capacity in the countries that have experienced regime change, which has led to fears of cross-border arms proliferation. This is particularly evident in the case of Libya, where concerns have been raised about the spread of weaponry in the North African Sahel region, which may find its way into the hands of terrorist groups, such as Al-Qaeda and Al-Shabaab. The countries of Algeria, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Yemen and even Kenya have experienced an increase of terrorist activity since the start of the Arab Spring.

Another source of concern has been the return of thousands of armed Tuareg soldiers from Libya to Mali, which was a contributing factor in the recent Mali military coup and a source of domestic instability. It is important to note that these security concerns are largely driven by a lack of State capacity in carrying out domestic political promises, as well as dealing with internal and external security threats. The Malian armed forces behind the coup claimed the government was not adequately equipping them to deal with separatist Tuareg fighters.

International politics

One of the issues that have been speculated about in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, is how the new governments will shape their foreign policies, particularly with regard to the West. Many democratic nations, including those in the West, generally supported the protestors demonstrating for greater liberties and civil rights.

French Foreign Minister Alain Juppe, whose country has close historic ties with the North African region, expressed confidence in the outcome of the actions of the protestors. President Nicolas Sarkozy too welcomed the pursuit of greater civil liberties. However, he emphasised that France did not have a policy that supported regime change. Sarkozy spearheaded the push to grant financial-aid packages to the postrevolutionary countries of Egypt and Tunisia. The French government was also key in spearheading the international military operation in Libya, through Nato.

Russian President Dmitri Medvedev expressed anxiety in the unpredictability of the initial protests. He was fearful that the revolutionary wave could destabilise Russia's neighbors, and Russia itself. After the initial protests, Medvedev welcomed the reforms and argued that socioeconomic change should occur in favor of the interests of the majority of the people residing in those countries. Russia, however, has again recently faced Western criticism for blocking intervention in Syria, by exercising its veto power in the UNSC.

Britain was of the belief that if financial aid was not provided for postrevolutionary Tunisia and Egypt, North African emigration to Europe would be exacerbated. Further, Prime Minister David Cameron argued that if financial aid was withheld from these countries, there would be prolonged chaos in the region, resulting in an increase of Islamic extremism and thereby creating fertile grounds for terrorism to thrive.

US President Barack Obama equated the Arab Spring phenomena to the American civil rights movement, in the same way that citizens fought for their human rights. He celebrated that power had changed hands to the majority and pledged to continue US security policy in the region, denouncing the use of violent and repressive government responses to freedom protestors. Obama also stressed the need to promote democratic reform across the region and to support any transition towards majority rule.

Israel, an important and strategic player in the region, as well as an important US ally, argued that only economic stability would ensure political stability in the Arab world. Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman recognised the Arab Spring as an opportunity for the region to move towards democracy and economic prosperity. He also emphasised that all Arab States going through a transition phase should recognise and respect the security of the Israeli State, which has traditionally shared political and ethnic tensions with the Muslim and Arab world.

Criticisms of foreign reactions

A number of countries, specifically Western States, have been censured for being hypocritical over the way they have dealt with countries affected by the Arab Spring. This is owing to the varying responses of the Western

powers. Why would they resort to military force in Libya, and not apply the same measures to human rights atrocities occurring in Syria? Perhaps it is preferential access to Libya's oil that these powers are interested in? Cameron responded when asked the question of why Britain was supporting the intervention in Libya: "just because we can't intervene everywhere, doesn't mean we shouldn't intervene somewhere."

Further, it has also been attested that the Obama administration, as with other US regimes, only backs a candidate that will serve US interests at the time. Mubarak was a traditional ally of the US and a strategic partner in the Middle Eastern region, which is generally hostile to the US and Israel. However, once it became clear that Mubarak's days were numbered, the US threw its weight behind the Muslim Brotherhood as the legitimate custodians of power in Egypt.

Despite the ambiguous nature of international State responses to the Arab Spring phenomenon, much of Western-Arab relations are dependent on the internal stability of those countries that experienced uprisings and went through reform. Western financial aid has been made dependent on the existence of internal policies that are democratic, secular, have a commitment to human rights and shun any form of terrorism that may present a threat to not only the incumbent regimes, but also to Western political and economic interests.

Africa after the Arab Spring

What implications are there for the fortune of the African continent as a whole. To answer this question, it is important to note that Africa is not a homogenous bloc by any means. It consists of a large array of ethnicities, religions, regional bodies and political cultures. Therefore, the Arab Spring protests will affect Africa's different regions and States in different ways, if at all.

At the epicenter, those States that did experience revolution, political and social life has changed fundamentally. Although these States are going through a transitional phase, whatever form their politics might take there is likely to be a move to greater civilian rule. This is certainly the intention with the likes of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, which have all had, or have scheduled elections in the future. What remains to be seen, is how the transition from interim rule to civilian rule will pan out, which will affect the countries political culture for the foreseeable future.

From a regional perspective, it is evident that there were elements of spillover in the surrounding countries, such as Syria, Morocco and Bahrain, with varying degrees of severity. The governments of States such as Morocco and Sudan have made concessions in response to protests, providing civil liberties and greater human rights. While others, particularly Syria, have brutally cracked down on the protestors, which despite peace efforts spearheaded by former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan, is developing into a drawn out conflict with neither Al-Assad nor the protestors backing down. Whatever the outcome it is clear that the Arab Spring has had a lasting effect on the region and will be seen as being integral to how the region's politics will be viewed - with greater emphasis on majority rule and democracy.

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