

Authoritarianism & Resilience in the Middle East: The legacy of the Arab Spring in Tunisia & Bahrain

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This article addresses the myth of authoritarian resilience in the Middle East after the Arab Spring. Looking in depth at two states that have had significantly different outcomes from the uprisings (Tunisia and Bahrain) the article analyses the factors that have led to the toppling of a regime in one case, and the strengthening of a monarchy in the other. In addition the article tries to elucidate the reasons for this seeming 'monarchical exception' and discusses the key actors in the push for change in the region, as well as investigating the reasons that allowed 'Presidents for Life' to flourish for so long.

Introduction

The Arab awakening has heralded a new era across the Middle East and North Africa, and in a short space of time the politics of the whole region has fast become unrecognisable compared to what it was a mere two years ago. Nizar Qabbani's poem sums up the situation aptly

'The old World is dead. The old books are dead... We want a

generation of giants. Arab children, corn ears of the future; you will break our chains' (Dabashi 2012).

The struggle of the frustrated youth yearning to lose their shackles has become synonymous with the Arab Spring. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi in Tunisia as the sun rose over 2011 has become the image that has exemplified the drive for change. Bouazizi's sister posed the question 'what kind of repression do you imagine it takes for a young man to do this?' (Noueihed 2011). This attitude would lead to actions being set in motion that would end in the toppling of a number of the authoritarian regimes across the Middle East. Many of these regimes had long gained a reputation of almost mythical resilience and had previously become bastions of stability. This however oversimplifies the issue as many regimes, particularly the Gulf Monarchies, have remained in control despite the harsh reprisals they have levied on the people who have protested their rule. Bahrain is one of the states that has weathered the storm reasonably well, and the future of its monarchy looks for the moment to be reasonably safe. This article will look at the concept of authoritarian resilience in Bahrain and Tunisia, and will examine how different types of autocracies may be more suitable to weathering change, along with the effect that outside pressures have on the regimes and the consequences for the region.

Regime Resilience in Tunisia & Bahrain

One of the most striking features of the Arab spring has been the fragility of the authoritarian regimes themselves. What was traditionally viewed as the defining characteristic of these autocratic administrations, their stability factor, was ironically also one of the factors that led to their downfall. Jean-Pierre Filiu observes that the extraordinary resilience of the Arab regimes over the past three decades stemmed partly from their ability to portray themselves as the 'only alternative to chaos' (2011: 73). It was this fear that dictators capitalised on across the Middle East

throughout the era of post-colonial independence, using their leadership skills and charismatic personalities to secure the adoration of the people by acting as a focal point during the confusion of transition.

What seems to have made some authoritarian dictators seem more vulnerable, and, as this article will suggest has been highlighted by the events of the Arab awakening, was the extent to which these leaders were deluded into believing in their own immortality. This certainly applied to Ben Ali's reign as President of Tunisia as well as that of his predecessor; despite his reluctance to name himself as another 'President of Life' Ben Ali's reign was also symptomatic of over-complacency and the feeling of omniscience and 'personification of power' when a leader is left unchecked (Owen 2012: 29). However, while this attitude is rife amongst republican presidents, the monarchies seem to be more considered and realistic about the supposed fragility of their hold on power.

One of the reasons the Gulf monarchies remain after the Arab spring has been their acknowledgement of this delicate situation. Assertions that Tunisia was a victim of its own success due to its progress in some economic, cultural and social spheres and allied with its proximity to the EU where higher standards of living exist seem to have some credence (Noueihad 2012: 90). On the other hand, the distinctly higher standard of living in Bahrain demonstrates that the hope of greater living standards does not necessarily threaten a regime.¹ The Gulf states' history of almost disdainful social investment as opposed to engaging in political reform, has been a workable solution until now. Hertog (2011) acknowledges that while it is preferable to have money thrown at you than be persecuted by the state, a new, more sustainable approach must be taken by the rulers of the Kingdom. The sudden social unrest has caught the

¹ Bahrain's rating on the 2010 Human Development report at number 39 ranks significantly above that of Tunisia at number 81. (UNDP 2010: 143-144).

Bahraini government off guard and in their desperation to maintain control they have had a severe lack of foresight in contingency planning for protests of this scale. This has contributed significantly to their fragility and has ensured a typical heavy-handed response from authorities which has in turn sparked further protests.

The role of the army and security forces in maintaining the authority of the regimes has always been paramount in the constant “quest for stability” the leaders aspire to achieve, but as the Arab Spring shows the loyalty of their armies may not be as unquestionable as the regimes would expect. Academics and international observers alike falsely predicted that ‘no daylight existed between regimes and their military’ (Gause 2011), but the reluctance of Tunisian Army Generals to order action against the peaceful protests of their own people challenged this assumption. While there is little chance of the Bahraini security forces taking a similar stance against the regime the lesson learnt from the Tunisian example is a stark reminder of the vital role that the army plays in maintaining power, and it is essential for the government that they maintain the loyalty of their Generals.

The Role of the International Community

Whilst the domestic politics of the states affected by the Arab Spring are widely viewed as the main battleground, one should not discount the role of the international community nor the surrounding neighbours’ roles in the on-going events. Both regimes in Tunisia and Bahrain have enjoyed favourable relations with the West in past decades. The former has been viewed as something of an “economic miracle” by those in the West;² while the latter has enjoyed a place at the top table of both US and UK

² The version of Tunisia seen by those in the west was more of “veiled truth” small reforms by Ben Ali allowing a number of opposition parties added to staggering growth figures for the region [8% in 1992 (Alexander, 1997)] account for some of the reasons Tunisia was seen internationally as an Arab success.

government with the US 5th fleet (vital in the past decade for operations in Afghanistan and Iraq stationed in the archipelago). While the international powers have praised the change in Tunisia,³ they have been slow to recognise and support the democratic protests in other Gulf nations, particularly in Bahrain. This could be due to the fact that instability in the Gulf could usher in a period of unrest in the markets which would boost the price of oil. Indeed the historical and contemporary links that the Western powers have to the Bahraini regime make it difficult to abandon quickly, as does the fact that anything that destabilises the regime in Bahrain would further disrupt the oil rich Saudi Arabia. Any threat to stability in “The Kingdom” is likely to drive up oil prices for consumers in the West, while Bahrain as mentioned below has limited “independence” as such from the oil giant (Noueihad 2012: 147).

However, pressure (albeit mild) from the West has increased after Bahraini defence forces employed violent means against their people in February 2011.⁴ The spectacle over the F1 Grand Prix added unwanted media attention to the regime, demonstrating that despite attempts from the Bahraini government to present it as an opportunity to show the country as ‘UNIFIED’, it remains as fragmented as ever. (Kinninmont 2012) Furthermore this author contends that international fickleness and lack of real thought in formulating foreign policy has stifled aspects of the Arab uprising.

³ New Tunisian President Moncef Marzouki has been praised by the international community for ‘keeping the ideas of the Arab spring alive’ (Foreign Policy, 2012) and is the joint winner of the prestigious Chatham House Prize in 2012 for ‘his role in ensuring that Tunisia remains at the forefront of the new democratic wave in the Middle East and North Africa’ (Chatham House, 2012).

⁴ On 16 March 2011 British Prime Minister David Cameron issued the first real warning to King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa, expressing concern over the deteriorating situation on the ground and called on the Bahraini government to ‘respect the right to peaceful protest and respond to the legitimate concerns of the Bahraini people’ (UK Government- Number 10 Downing St., 2011).

Two examples demonstrate this: the first is epitomised in the gaffe surrounding the French foreign minister Michele Alliotte-Marie who was enjoying the perks of links with the Ali regime as protests began in 2010, having to be quickly removed from her summer holiday to prevent embarrassment to the French Government (Noueihad 2012: 64). The second is the situation surrounding the war on terror: Arab regimes would designate uprisings as being linked to Al-Qaeda operations, so as not to arouse suspicion from the West (Filiu 2011) which demonstrates how the West creates an atmosphere where the authoritarian regimes are legitimised and strengthened. Bahrain and the Gulf monarchies have also taken again to blaming Iran for these uprisings trying to adopt an argument that has worked for them in the past. However, certain neighbours' power comes not just from influence alone: Bahrain relies heavily on Saudi Arabia for financial support, with over \$448 million pledged at the start of 2013 for projects ranging from housing to education and electricity networks (al-Jayousi 2013). Simon Henderson, a Gulf analyst at the Washington Institute of Near East Policy, has noted that 'Bahrain's rulers have always been dependent on the generosity of Saudi Arabia' and it is often argued that a further merging of policies is possible as Saudi Arabia drives for further influence in the region (Murphy 2013). Furthermore troops from the Kingdom were "invited in" to help quell the problems but evidence suggests that they may have exceeded their remit by conducting house-to-house searches (Ulrichsen 2011). This attests that authoritarian resilience in the Gulf depends on the condition of their mutual solidarity, along with maintaining the atmosphere internationally, that has previously enabled them to maintain their stability.

The Role of the Youth

Finally, one must observe the disproportionate role that youths have played in the Arab spring. The myth of authoritarian resilience has been based on "Presidents for Life" believing in their utmost omnipotence which has increasingly alienated them from, and made them blind to, the

needs of, primarily, their young people. Whilst the Arab uprisings may have caused shock to many by the swift nature of their conception and severity, in hindsight it is easier to understand how young people came to lead these supposedly "leaderless movements". The economic, cultural and social alienation of the youth in Tunisia, altogether with their high levels of unemployment and education, mixed a dangerous cocktail that would bring the regime to its knees. Tunisia was the first to show that the most important legacy of the uprising was the youth, and the hope they bring with them (Willis 2012).

The disaffected younger generations of Bahrain have shown that despite the heavy handed reaction of their government they have ideas, hopes and dreams to see a change in their country. A recent forum held at Chatham House entitled "Bahrain: Youth Perspectives on the Future" specifically addressed the concerns that young Bahrainis had and encompassed a variety of individuals from different backgrounds ranging from economists to entrepreneurs, most of whom hailed from Bahrain. They encapsulated the mood of many in Bahrain that while there were obvious obstacles to change, there was some cause for optimism. Mirroring the slogan that was chanted during many of the initial protests, they hold the belief that people in Bahrain need to see themselves as 'Bahraini rather than Shi'a or Sunni' (Chatham House 2012: 15). Young people in Bahrain want their leaders to listen to them and while they may not have hope of competing with pure military strength, their ability to retain some cohesion in the face of attempted "sectarianisation" of the uprising by the authorities⁵ is a key weapon in their arsenal. The youths' ability

⁵ The Bahraini regime has attempted to derail the popular movement and build 'domestic and regional support for a crackdown' by labelling the protests as being back by the Shi'a majority from Iran. Of course while the Shi'ites were in greater preponderance, it is much more due to their greater number in the kingdom, and their rights were more aligned with a quest for democratic freedoms and human rights than 'Shi'a particularism' (Lynch 2013)

to harness new technologies such as online social networks has allowed them to voice themselves in a way that they can face little chance of prosecution. Cyberspace has proved to be a powerful tool for protestors and the only question that remains is how long the regimes which remain under siege from the uprisings can hold out before pressure builds to a point where they either have to give in to demands, or are forced to respond in such a drastic fashion that the international community can no longer stand idly by.

Conclusion

It is concluded that the future for authoritarian resilience in the Arab world is an uncertain one. The uprisings that have occurred are not typical of what has previously been seen in the Middle East in terms of their spontaneity and their speed. Armies which have remained loyal to the people, along with the fact that the regimes have long ignored the youth of their countries are both factors integral to the success of the awakening. However, doubts remain over the resilience of the authoritarian Gulf monarchies. One would be inclined to note that the strength of the response by the Gulf is such that any room for uprising would be made untenable due to the casualties that would be incurred. Although Kinninmont notes that the monarchies have remained in place because they are resilient 'rather than being resilient because they are monarchies' (2012), time is likely to be the real decider on the rule of 'monarchical exception' that has since proved to be the case among the remaining authoritarian regimes in the Middle East. Whilst monarchies may have been able to adapt to the movements that had toppled other regimes in the Middle East, sustained pressure from domestic and international actors alike would again push to make their position increasingly untenable.

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