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The Arab Counterrevolution

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Alex Majoli/Magnum Photos

Protesters celebrating Hosni Mubarak's resignation in Tahrir Square, Cairo, February 11, 2011

When the music's over, turn out the lights.
—Jim Morrison

The Arab uprising that started in Tunisia and Egypt reached its climax on February 11, the day President Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down. It was peaceful, homegrown, spontaneous, and seemingly unified. Lenin's theory was turned on its head. The Russian leader postulated that a victorious revolution required a structured and disciplined political party, robust leadership, and a clear program. The Egyptian rebellion, like its Tunisian precursor and unlike the Iranian Revolution of 1979, possessed neither organization nor identifiable leaders nor an unambiguous agenda.

Since Mubarak's ouster, everything that has happened in the region has offered a striking contrast with what came before. Protests turned violent in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. Foreign nations got involved in each of these conflicts. Ethnic, tribal, and sectarian divisions have come to the fore. Old parties and organizations as well as political and economic elites contend for power, leaving many protesters with the feeling that the history they were making

not long ago is now passing them by.

Amid rising insecurity and uncertainty there is fear and a sense of foreboding. In many places there are blood, threats, and doubts. People once thrilled by the potential benefits of change are dumbfounded by its actual and obvious costs. As anxiety about the future grows, earlier episodes cease to be viewed as pristine or untouchable. Accounts of the uprisings as transparent, innocent affairs are challenged. In Egypt and Tunisia, plots and conspiracies are imagined and invented; the military and other remnants of the old regime, which continue to hold much power, are suspected of having engineered preemptive coups. In Bahrain, protesters are accused of being Iranian agents; in Syria, they are portrayed as foreign-backed Islamist radicals. Little evidence is offered. It doesn't seem to matter.

February 11 was the culmination of the Arab revolution. On February 12, the counterrevolution began.

1.

The Arab upheaval of 2011 is often heralded as an unparalleled occurrence in the region's history. Ghosts of the European revolutions of 1848 and the popular protests that brought down the Soviet bloc in 1989 are summoned. There is no need to look so far back or so far away. The current Arab awakening displays unique features, but in the feelings first unleashed and the political and emotional arc subsequently followed, it resembles events that swept the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s.

In the days well before social media and 24/7 television, Gamal Abdel Nasser, a young Egyptian army officer, captivated the imagination of millions of Arabs, prompting displays of popular exhilaration that would withstand comparison with anything witnessed today. The Baath Party took power in Syria and Iraq, promising the restoration of dignity and championing freedom and modernity; a triumphant national liberation movement marched to victory in Algeria; a socialist republic was established in South Yemen; and the odd blend that was Muammar Qaddafi came to power in Libya.

At the time, many people were moved by the illegitimacy and inefficacy of state institutions; rampant corruption and inequitable distribution of wealth; the concentration of power in the hands of parasitic elites; revulsion with subservience to former and current colonial masters; and humiliation, epitomized above all by the Palestinian catastrophe and the inability to redress it. Slogans from that era celebrated independence, Arab unity, freedom, dignity, and socialism.

Although the military was the vanguard then, the rebellions of 2011 arose from similar emotions and were inspired by similar aspirations. The misfortunes of Arab unity have rendered the concept suspect. Socialism too has been tainted. But substitute local and

domestic unity within each country (*Wihda Wataniyah*) for Pan-Arab unity (*Wihda Arabiyah*) and social justice, as well as attacks against crony capitalism for socialism, and it is hard not to hear clear echoes of the past in today's calls for change.

The fate of that earlier Arab rejuvenation offers a useful precedent but, more than that, a cautionary tale. Amid the turmoil and excitement, numerous political currents competed. Several espoused a blend of secular nationalism and pan-Arabism, others variants of Marxism, still others more Western-oriented liberalism. In the end, leftists and Communists were suppressed, most violently in Iraq and Sudan; elsewhere, they were co-opted or defeated. Liberal activists never established an authentic foothold; suspected of links to foreign powers, they were marginalized. After briefly flirting with Islamists, regimes quickly came to view them as a threat and, with varying degrees of bloodletting, drove them underground in Egypt, North Africa, and the Levant.

What emerged were ruling coalitions of the army and various secular nationalist movements. These yielded authoritarian, militaristic republics whose professed ideologies of modernism, pan-Arabism, and socialism were more make-believe than real. They exercised power through extensive internal security organizations—the much-dreaded *Mukhabarat*; the suppression of dissent; and enlistment of diverse social groups in support of the regime —merchants, peasants, industrialists, and state bureaucrats. Politics was the exclusive province of rulers. For others, it became a criminal activity.

The experiment ended in unmitigated failure. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of the few; corruption was endemic. Segments of society that had most enthusiastically greeted their new leaders, from the rural underclass to the urban declassed, were discarded or ignored. Where Arab regimes promised most they arguably accomplished least. They had vowed to reassert genuine national independence. Yet on the regional and international scenes the voice of the Arab world eventually went silent. On crucial issues such as the fate of Palestine, Iraq, and Sudan, regimes made noise of the most grandiloquent sort, but with no discernible impact. As the new millennium set in, even the clatter that by then had become a joke began to fade.

The legacy of this era goes further than material privation, or dysfunctional governance, or internal repression. Regimes born in the heyday of Nasser and Pan-Arabism lost the asset that would have allowed much to be forgiven and without which nothing else will suffice: a sense of authenticity and national dignity. Arab states were viewed as counterfeit. Citizens were put off by how their rulers took over public goods as private possessions and made national decisions under foreign influence. When that happens, the regimes' very existence—the merciless domination they impose on their people and the debasing subservience they concede to outsiders—becomes a constant, unbearable provocation.

2.

The Arab uprising of 2011 was a popular rebuke to this waste. By pouring onto the streets, many thousands of people rejected what they perceived as alien and aggressive transplants. Although initial slogans alluded to reform, the actual agenda was regime change. In Tunisia and Egypt, they won round one in spectacular fashion. Elsewhere, things got messier, as regimes had time to adapt and shape their response. Violence spread, civil war threatened, foreign powers joined the melee, and centrifugal powers—sectarian, ethnic, tribal, or geographic—asserted themselves.

The Arab awakening is a tale of three battles rolled into one: people against regimes; people against people; and regimes against other regimes. The first involves the tug-of-war between regimes and spontaneous protesters. The demonstrators, most of them political only in the broadest sense of the term, are stirred by visceral, nebulous emotions—paramount among them the basic feeling of being fed up. Many don't know what they want or who they support but are confident of what they refuse—daily indignities, privations, and the stifling of basic freedoms—and who they reject, which makes them formidable adversaries. Neither of the instruments used by rulers to maintain control, repression and co-optation, can easily succeed: repression because it further solidifies the image of the state as hostile; co-optation because there are no clearly empowered leaders to win over and attempts to seduce convey a message of weakness, which further emboldens the demonstrators.

The second struggle involves a focused fight among more organized political groups. Some are associated with the old order; they include the military, social and economic elites, local chieftains, as well as a coterie of ersatz traditional parties. Others are the outlawed or semitolerated opposition, including exiled personalities, parties, and, most importantly, Islamists. In Libya and Syria, armed groups with various leanings and motivations have emerged. Little of the enthusiasm or innocence of the protest movements survives here; this is the province of unsentimental dealings and raw power politics.

Relations between young protesters and more traditional opposition parties can be tenuous and it is not always clear how representative either are. In Egypt, where the street battle against the regime was quickly won and Mubarak rapidly resigned, organized opposition groups—from the Muslim Brotherhood to long-established parties—subsequently stepped in and sought to muscle the disorganized protesters out. In Yemen, street demonstrators coexist uneasily with organized opposition parties and defectors from the regime. In Libya, rivalry among strands of the opposition has led to bloodshed and could portend a chaotic future. Some of the local popular committees that spontaneously emerged in Syria warily eye and distrust the exiled opposition.

The third struggle is a regional and international competition for influence. It has become an important part of the picture and assumes an increasingly prominent role. The region's strategic balance is at stake: whether Syria will remain in alliance with Iran; whether Bahrain

will drift from Saudi Arabia's influence; whether Turkey will emerge bolstered or battered; whether stability in Iraq will suffer. One suspects more than faithfulness to reforms and infatuation with democratic principles when Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, which both ruthlessly suppress dissent at home, urge Syria to allow peaceful protesters; when Iran, which backs the regime in Damascus, castigates the oppression in Bahrain; and when Ankara hedges its bets between the Syrian regime and its foes.

Interlopers are legion. The sense grows that what happens anywhere will have a profound impact everywhere. NATO fought in Libya and helped oust Qaddafi. Iran and Saudi Arabia play out their rivalry in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria; Qatar hopes to elevate its standing by propelling the Libyan and Syrian opposition to power; in Syria, Turkey sees an opportunity to side with the majority Sunnis yet simultaneously fears what Damascus and Tehran might do in return: could they rekindle Kurdish separatism or jeopardize Ankara's delicate modus vivendi in Iraq? Iran will invest more in Iraq if it feels Syria slipping away. As they become buoyed by advances in Libya and Syria, how long before Iraqi Islamists and their regional allies rekindle a struggle they fear was prematurely aborted?

The US has not been the last to get involved, but it has done so without a clear sense of purpose, wishing to side with the protesters but unsure it can live with the consequences. The least visible, curiously yet wisely, has been Israel. It knows how much its interests are in the balance but also how little it can do to protect them. Silence has been the more judicious choice.

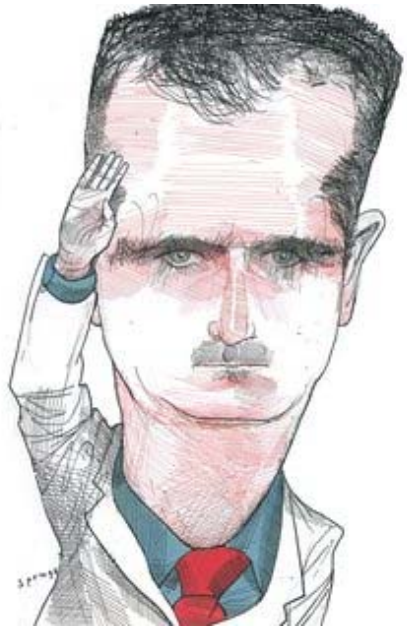
3.

Any number of outcomes could emerge from this complex brew. Regional equilibriums could be profoundly unsettled, with Iran losing its Syrian ally; the US, its Egyptian partner; Saudi Arabia, stability in the Gulf; Turkey, its newly acquired prestige; Iraq, its budding but fragile democracy. A wider Middle Eastern conflict could ensue. At the domestic level, some uprisings could result in a mere reshuffling of cards as new configurations of old elites keep control. There could be prolonged chaos, instability, and the targeting of minority groups.

The uprisings, partly motivated by economic hardship, ironically make those hardships still more severe. Where elections take place, they likely will prompt confusion, as groups with uncertain political experience compete. As with all upheavals, there will be a messy chapter before clarity sets in and the actual balance of power becomes evident. Increasing numbers could well question whether emerging regimes are improvements. Nostalgia for the past cannot lag far behind.

Some states might fragment because of ethnic, sectarian, or tribal divides. Civil war, a variant of which has broken out in Yemen and is deeply feared in Syria, may emerge. The region is ripe for breakdown. Sudan is partitioned; Yemen is torn between a Houthi rebellion in the

north and secessionists in the south; Iraqi Kurdistan teeters on the edge of separation; in Palestine, Gaza and the West Bank each goes its own way; in Syria, Sunnis, Alawites, Kurds, Druze, and Bedouin tribes might push for greater self-rule. The upheaval could accelerate the drift. The uprisings revitalized symbols of unity—the national flag and anthem—yet simultaneously loosened the state's hold and facilitated displays of subnational identity. Even the often ignored Berbers of North Africa have become more assertive.



Bashar al-Assad; drawing by John Springs

For all this uncertainty, there seems little doubt—as protesters tire and as the general public tires of them—in what direction the balance will tilt. After the dictator falls, incessant political upheaval carries inordinate economic and security costs and most people long for order and safety. The young street demonstrators challenge the status quo, ignite a revolutionary spirit, and point the way for a redistribution of power. But what they possess in enthusiasm they lack in organization and political experience. What gives them strength during the uprising—their amorphous character and impulsiveness—leads to their subsequent undoing. Their domain is the more visible and publicized. The real action, much to their chagrin, takes place elsewhere.

The outcome of the Arab awakening will not be determined by those who launched it. The popular uprisings were broadly welcomed, but they do not neatly fit the social and political makeup of traditional communities often organized along tribal and kinship ties, where religion has a central part and foreign meddling is the norm. The result will be decided by other, more calculating and hard-nosed forces.

Nationalists and leftists will make a bid, but their reputation has been sullied for having stood for a promise already once betrayed. Liberal, secular parties carry scant potential; the appeal they enjoy in the West is inversely proportional to the support they possess at home. Fragments of the old regime retain significant assets: the experience of power; ties to the security services; economic leverage; and local networks of clients. They will be hard to dislodge, but much of the protesters' ire is directed at them and they form easy targets. They can survive and thrive, but will need new patrons and protectors.

That leaves two relatively untarnished and powerful forces. One is the military, whose positions, as much as anything, have molded the course of events. In Libya and Yemen, they split between regime and opposition supporters, which contributed to a stalemate of sorts. In Syria, they so far have sided with the regime; should that change, much will change with it. In Egypt, although closely identified with the former regime, they dissociated themselves in

time, sided with the protesters, and emerged as central power brokers. They are in control, a position at once advantageous and uncomfortable. Their preference is to rule without the appearance of ruling, in order to maintain their privileges while avoiding the limelight and accountability. To that end, they have tried to reach understandings with various political groups. If they do not succeed, a de facto military takeover cannot be ruled out.

And then there are the Islamists. They see the Arab awakening as their golden opportunity. This was not their revolution nor was it their idea. But, they hope, this is their time.

4.

From all corners of the Arab world, Islamists of various tendencies are coming in from the cold. Virtually everywhere they are the largest single group as well as the best organized. In Egypt and Tunisia, where they had been alternatively—and sometimes concurrently—tolerated and repressed, they are full-fledged political actors. In Libya, where they had been suppressed, they joined and played a major part in the rebellion. In Syria, where they had been massacred, they are a principal component of the protest movement.

Living in the wilderness has equipped them well. Years of waiting has taught them patience, the cornerstone of their strategy. They learned the art of survival and of compromise for the sake of survival. They are the only significant political force with a vision and program unsullied, because untested, by the exercise of, or complicity in, power. Their religious language and moral code resonate deeply with large parts of the population. Islamism provides an answer to people who feel they have been prevented from being themselves.

Islamists know the alarm they inspire at home and abroad and the price they formerly paid for it. In the early 1990s, when the Algerian Islamic Salvation Front was on the cusp of a resounding electoral triumph, the army intervened. The world stood aside. A civil war and tens of thousands of casualties later, Algeria's Islamists have yet to recover. After Hamas's parliamentary victory in Palestine in 2006, it was ostracized by the world and prevented from governing.

The lesson seems clear: the safest path to power can be to avoid its unabashed exercise. With this history in mind, the Islamists might want to stay away from the front lines. In Egypt, some Brotherhood leaders made it plain that they will regulate their share of the parliamentary vote, preferring to sit in the legislature without controlling it. They will not run for high-profile offices, such as the presidency. They will build coalitions. They will lead from behind.

The Islamists are on a mission to reassure. They might play down controversial religious aspects of their project, with emphasis less on Islamic law than on good governance and the fight against corruption, a free-market economy and a pluralistic political system that

guarantees human and gender rights. They will argue for a more assertive and independent foreign policy, but might at the same time strive for good relations with the West. They will be skeptical about peace agreements with Israel but they will neither abrogate them nor push for open hostility to the Jewish state. The model they will hold out will be closer to Erdogan's Turkey than to the ayatollahs' Iran or the Taliban's Afghanistan though, since they lack Turkey's political culture and institutions, the model they eventually build will be their own.

Quietly, the Islamists might present themselves as the West's most effective allies against its most dangerous foes: armed jihadists, whom they have the religious legitimacy to contain and, if necessary, cripple; and Iran, whose appeal to the Arab street they can counteract by not shunning the Islamic Republic and presenting a less aggressive, more attractive, and indigenous Islamic model. There are precedents: in the 1950s and 1960s, Islamists in the region sided with the West and Saudi Arabia against Nasser's Egypt; not long ago they supported Jordan's monarch against the PLO and domestic dissidents; and, today, Islamist Turkey is both in Washington's good graces and an active NATO member.

Their quest will not be without challenges. The flip side of their extensive experience of opposition is that they have no experience in governing. Their knowledge of economics is rudimentary. Should they be called upon to participate in affairs of state, their reputation will suffer at a time of predictable popular disillusionment and economic turmoil. The combination of high expectations and unfulfilled promises may expose them to protests they are ill-suited to endure.

The prospect of power and the taste of freedom are testing the Islamists' legendary discipline and unity. In Egypt in particular, several fissures have opened. Young Muslim Brothers chide their elders for their conservatism, ambivalence toward street protests, and overly cozy relationship with the military. There are grumblings and splinter organizations. Warnings from the past notwithstanding, some Islamists may want to exercise as much power as the movement can gain. There are tensions between those drawn to allying with secular parties and those willing to join with the more puritan and militant Salafists whose Islamism is based on literalist readings of scripture.

Other cracks could appear. Those conditioned by a deeply ingrained suspicion of the US will be reluctant to engage with Washington and will prefer an understanding with Tehran. Others will hope to roll back Shiite power; still others might turn to Riyadh. The Syrian branch of the Brotherhood, which has suffered under the rule of the Iranian-backed Assad regime, is likely to consider any rapprochement with Tehran unthinkable. Islamists could make different calculations in Yemen or Jordan, should they help overthrow their respective pro-Western regimes.

The thorniest challenge to the traditional middle-of-the-road Islamists will come from the

Salafists. Their focus traditionally has been on individual morals and behavior and they have tended to oppose party and electoral politics. Yet they have undergone remarkable change. In Egypt, they have established a strong grassroots political presence, created a number of political parties, and plan to compete in elections. Elsewhere, they are actively participating in protests, at times violently. The more traditional Islamists, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, bend their views to placate foreign or domestic concerns, the more they take part in governing, the more they risk alienating those of their followers drawn to Salafism and its stricter interpretation of Islam. As the Muslim Brotherhood struggles to strike a balance, the Salafists could emerge as unintended beneficiaries. In Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the most significant future rivalry is unlikely to be between Islamists and so-called pro-democracy secular forces. It might well be between mainstream Islamists and Salafists.

5.

Of all the features of the initial Arab uprisings, the more notable relate to what they were not. They were not spearheaded by the military, engineered from outside, backed by a powerful organization, or equipped with a clear vision and leadership. Nor, remarkably, were they violent. The excitement generated by these early revolutionary moments owed as much to what they lacked as to what they possessed. The absence of those attributes is what allowed so many, especially in the West, to believe that the spontaneous celebrations they were witnessing would translate into open, liberal, democratic societies.

Revolutions devour their children. The spoils go to the resolute, the patient, who know what they are pursuing and how to achieve it. Revolutions almost invariably are short-lived affairs, bursts of energy that destroy much on their pathway, including the people and ideas that inspired them. So it is with the Arab uprising. It will bring about radical changes. It will empower new forces and marginalize others. But the young activists who first rush onto the streets tend to lose out in the skirmishes that follow. Members of the general public might be grateful for what they have done. They often admire them and hold them in high esteem. But they do not feel they are part of them. The usual condition of a revolutionary is to be tossed aside.

The Arab world's immediate future will very likely unfold in a complex tussle between the army, remnants of old regimes, and the Islamists, all of them with roots, resources, as well as the ability and willpower to shape events. Regional parties will have influence and international powers will not refrain from involvement. There are many possible outcomes—from restoration of the old order to military takeover, from unruly fragmentation and civil war to creeping Islamization. But the result that many outsiders had hoped for—a victory by the original protesters—is almost certainly foreclosed.

After some hesitation, the US and others have generally taken the side of the protesters. Several considerations were at work, among them the hope that this support will strengthen

those most liable to espouse pro-Western views and curry favor with those most likely to take the helm. New rulers might express gratitude toward those who stood by them. But any such reflex probably will be short-lived. The West likely will awake to an Arab world whose rulers are more representative and assertive, but not more sympathetic or friendly.

The French and the British helped liberate the Arab world from four centuries of Ottoman rule; the US enabled the Afghan Mujahideen to liberate themselves from Soviet domination and freed the Iraqi people from Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. Before long, yesterday's liberators became today's foes. Things are not as they seem. The sound and fury of revolutionary moments can dull the senses and obscure the more ruthless struggles going on in the shadows.

—August 31, 2011