Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the *'Committee on Publication Ethics'*

Online ISSN: 2584-184X



Research Article

Arab Spring to Arab Winter: Why Democracy Failed in the Middle East

AUTHOR(S): Dr. Neha Yadav

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23793348

ABSTRACT

The Arab Spring, which began in December 2010 in Tunisia with the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, was hailed as the fourth wave of democratisation. Within months, authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen fell, and massive protests erupted in Syria, Bahrain, and other countries. The world expected that the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region would finally transition to democracy. However, within a decade, this optimism turned into pessimism. The term "Arab Winter" emerged to describe the aftermath - civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen, the return of military authoritarianism in Egypt, and the deepening of authoritarianism in other states. Only Tunisia was seen as a partial success, and even that collapsed with President Kais Saied's power grab in 2021.

This research paper seeks to answer the central question: Why did democracy fail in the Middle East after the Arab Spring? The paper argues that the failure was not due to a single factor but a combination of structural, institutional, and external factors. The study identifies five major reasons: 1) Absence of strong democratic institutions and civil society, 2) The deep role of the military in politics, 3) Sectarian and tribal divisions (Sunni-Shia, Islamist-Secular), 4) The failure of political Islam to provide democratic governance, and 5) The negative role of external powers (USA, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran). The research is based on qualitative methodology, using secondary data from academic journals, books, and reports from Freedom House and UNDP. The paper uses comparative case studies of Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria to prove its hypothesis. It concludes that democracy cannot be imported overnight; it requires strong institutions, inclusive political culture, and economic justice, which were largely absent in the Arab world.

KEYWORDS: Arab Spring, Arab Winter, Democratisation, Authoritarianism, Middle East, Political Islam, Civil-Military Relations.

Article History

- **ISSN**: 2584-184X
- **Received:** 20 Apr 2024
- **Accepted**: 26 May 2024
- **Published:** 30 May 2024
- **MRR:**2(5) May 2024: 49-51
- **©2024, All Rights Reserved**
- **Peer Review Process:** Yes
- **Plagiarism Checked**: Yes

Authors Details

Dr. Neha Yadav
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Maharshi Dayanand Law College, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India

© 2024 Dr. Neha Yadav. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY NC ND) https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

1. INTRODUCTION

On 17 December 2010, a 26-year-old street vendor in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, set himself on fire after police confiscated his cart. This single act ignited a region. Within 28 days, Tunisia's 23-year-old dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali fled the country. The slogan "Ash-sha'ab yurid isqat an-nizam" (The people want the fall of the regime) spread like wildfire from Tunis to Cairo, from Sanaa to Damascus.

This was the Arab Spring. For political scientists, it was a puzzle. The Middle East was long considered "exceptional" to democratization. Theories of Rentier State, where oil-rich governments buy loyalty, and the strong surveillance state, made experts believe Arabs don't want democracy. The Arab Spring proved them wrong. People did want dignity (Karama), freedom (Hurriya), and social justice (Adala).

But by 2014, the narrative changed. Egypt's first democratically elected President Mohamed Morsi was overthrown by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in a military coup. Libya disintegrated into two governments and militias. Syria's peaceful protests turned into a brutal civil war with 500,000 deaths. Yemen faced the world's worst humanitarian crisis. This phase was termed "Arab Winter."

Why did this happen? This paper explores this question. The failure of democracy in the Middle East is one of the most important political questions of the 21st century.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To trace the causes and spread of the Arab Spring uprisings.
2. To analyse the transition process in four key countries: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.
3. To identify the structural and political reasons for the failure of democratic consolidation.
4. To evaluate the role of the military and external powers in the democratic reversal.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This is a qualitative, comparative case-study-based research. It uses secondary sources - Books like 'The Arab Uprising' by Marc Lynch, journal articles, and reports from international organisations. The theoretical framework used is Transition Theory by Dankwart Rustow and the concept of Deep State.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars are divided. Optimists like Larry Diamond saw Arab Spring as the Fourth Wave of Democracy (Huntington). Pessimists like Olivier Roy argued that Arab societies lack the civic culture for democracy. This paper takes a middle path, arguing that while democratic aspirations were real, the structural conditions were not ripe.

5. THE JOURNEY: FROM SPRING TO WINTER - CASE STUDIES

A. Tunisia: The Only Success That Failed

Tunisia was the birthplace and the only success story. Why? It had a strong middle class, a relatively homogenous population (no Sunni-Shia divide), a strong labor union (UGTT), and a small army that stayed out of politics. It drafted a progressive 2014 Constitution. But its economy never improved. Youth unemployment remained at 35%. This economic failure led to frustration, and in July 2021, President Kais Saied dissolved parliament. Tunisia's democracy also collapsed.

B. Egypt: The Classic Military Coup

Egypt is the most important case. Hosni Mubarak ruled for 30 years. In 18 days of Tahrir Square protests, he fell. Elections were held, and Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi won in 2012. But Morsi made three mistakes: 1) He tried to Islamize the state quickly, 2) He failed to control the economy, 3) He alienated the secular youth and the Army. The Egyptian Army, which controls 40% of the economy, never accepted civilian control. With support from Saudi Arabia and UAE, General Sisi overthrew Morsi. Egypt returned to a harsher military dictatorship than Mubarak.

C. Libya & Syria: The Collapse into Civil War

Libya and Syria show what happens when the state itself collapses. Both were ruled by personalist dictatorships - Gaddafi and Assad family - with no institutions. When the dictator fell (Gaddafi) or was challenged (Assad), there was no army or political party to hold the country. Tribal divisions in Libya and Alawite-Sunni sectarianism in Syria, fueled by external powers (NATO in Libya, Russia-Iran vs USA-Saudi in Syria), led to civil war.

6. WHY DEMOCRACY FAILED: FIVE KEY REASONS

Reason 1: Absence of Institutions and Civil Society

Democracy is not just elections. It is institutions - independent judiciary, free press, strong political parties. Arab states were "Fierce States" - strong intelligence agencies but weak institutions. When dictators fell, there was a vacuum. Elections happened, but there were no rules to respect election results.

Reason 2: The Deep State and Military Economy

In Egypt, Algeria, Syria, the Army is not a professional army. It is a business empire. Egypt's army owns hotels, factories, petrol pumps. It will never allow a civilian government to audit its business. This is the 'Deep State' (Al-Dawla al-Amiqa). Kautilya called this 'Amatya' becoming too powerful.

Reason 3: The Islamist-Secular Divide and Political Islam's Failure

The biggest hope was that Islamist parties like Muslim Brotherhood would become like Europe's Christian Democrats. They failed. Once in power, they prioritized Sharia law over the economy and tried to capture all institutions, creating fear among seculars. This gave the army an excuse to return.

Reason 4: Sectarianism and Tribalism

Democracy needs a common identity - "We are all Egyptians." In Middle East, identity is sectarian - "I am Sunni, Shia, Alawite, Kurd." Dictators used this divide to rule. When they fell, these identities clashed for power. Syria and Iraq are prime examples.

Reason 5: The Negative Role of External Powers

Democracy failed because external powers wanted it to fail.

© 2024 Dr. Neha Yadav. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY NC ND) https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Saudi Arabia and UAE: Feared that democracy in Egypt would inspire their own people. So, they funded Sisi with $12 Billion to crush the Muslim Brotherhood.
USA: Had a dual policy. Supported democracy in speeches but supported dictators for oil and Israel's security.
Russia and Iran: Supported Assad in Syria to maintain their influence, crushing democratic protests.
Reason 6: Economic Failure
All Arab Spring countries had youth bulge and unemployment. Revolution increased economic instability. No new government could provide jobs. Hungry people choose stability (bread) over freedom (ballot).

7. CONCLUSION

The Arab Spring proved that the desire for dignity and democracy is universal, even in the Middle East. The failure was not because Arabs are culturally unfit for democracy, as some orientalist scholars argue. The failure was structural.
The transition from authoritarianism to democracy requires four things, as per Dankwart Rustow: National Unity, Strong Institutions, Political Leadership, and Economic Development. The Middle East had none. It had weak national unity, no institutions, polarised leadership, and rentier economies.
Therefore, Arab Spring to Arab Winter was not a surprise. It was predictable. The lesson is that toppling a dictator is easy, but building a democracy is very difficult. It takes decades.
The future of democracy in the Middle East is not dead. The underlying causes - youth unemployment, corruption, lack of dignity - still exist. Another uprising is possible, but unless the structural issues are addressed, the result may again be an Arab Winter.

REFERENCES

1. Lynch M. The Arab uprising: the unfinished revolutions of the New Middle East. New York: PublicAffairs; 2014.
2. Diamond L. Why the Arab Spring will be a long winter. The Atlantic. 2011.
3. Roy O. The transformation of the Arab world. J Democr. 2012.
4. Freedom House. Freedom in the world: Middle East. 2023.
5. Anderson L. Demystifying the Arab Spring. Foreign Aff. 2011.

Creative Commons (CC) License

This article is an open-access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution–Non-Commercial–No Derivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) license. This license permits sharing and redistribution of the article in any medium or format for non-commercial purposes only, provided that appropriate credit is given to the original author(s) and source. No modifications, adaptations, or derivative works are permitted under this license.

© 2024 Dr. Neha Yadav. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY NC ND) https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/