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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.1177/08969205231191760

Peer reviewed

Before and After the Arab Uprisings

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After the Arab Uprisings: Progress and Stagnation in the Middle East and North Africa. By Shamiran Mako and Valentine Moghadam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021. 288 pp. $29.99 (cloth). ISBN: 9781108555357.

In late December 2010, Tunisians rose up in revolt against the dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The protests were set off by the tragic significance of Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in front of a government building on 17 December; this 26-year-old street vendor's act was a desperate and angry response to police agents' callous obstruction of his meager livelihood in an opportunity-barren environment, which was compounded by the public humiliation they subjected him to, and his inability to persuade—or the resources to bribe—any official to help him. Twenty-eight days of mass civil resistance later, Ben Ali was gone. Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution', as it came to be named, provided an inspiration and one of the catalysts for massive protests in Egypt that began on 25 January 2011, against the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak. Eighteen days later, Mubarak resigned.

The stunningly rapid end to two sclerotic and corrupt regimes, brought about by mass protests that would brook no alternative to the downfall of their dictators, galvanized protests in other countries in the region. In February and March, millions of Arabs took to their streets and plazas chanting 'The people want the downfall of the regime' (*al-sha'ab yurid asqat al-nizam*) and demanding freedom (*hurriyah*), justice (*'adalah*), bread (*hubs*), and dignity (*karamah*). In real time, this political moment of upheaval and aspiration was described as an 'Arab spring'. The concept of 'spring' implied two meanings: a blossoming of politics born of hope and a rising up by millions of Arabs intent on uprooting corrupt regimes and authoritarian status quos.

Collectively, these mass mobilizations constituted 'the Arab uprisings'. They are long over and the region is worse off than the before times. Several Arab countries are embroiled in conflicts that have caused suffering and destruction unprecedented in their own national histories, and almost everywhere else political repression and staggering economic inequality remain unchecked (Chancel et al., 2022). The war in Syria, which began in 2011 as a full-scale military assault on anti-regime protestors, became a globalized conflagration that produced a humanitarian disaster unmatched since the Rwanda genocide, and arguably worse for its longevity and the scale of displacement. In Yemen, the uprising led to the fall of another dictator and ushered in a transitional

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period during which a National Dialogue Conference set to work remaking the social contract. But a violent civil conflict, which began in 2014 when Houthi militants took over the capital city of Sana'a and routed the transitional government, escalated in 2015 into a Saudi-led US-supported multilateral war; hundreds of thousands of Yeminis were killed and the country was made unlivable for millions of others who have suffered the consequences of man-made famine, epidemic cholera, and destroyed infrastructure. In Egypt, following the downfall of the dictator, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took over, headed by General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who declared the revolution over and forcibly cleared the streets of protestors. There was a brief 'partially free' interlude during which the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) won the country's first democratic election and Mohamed Morsi became president. That government was overthrown by a military coup in June 2013. MB supporters of Morsi mounted large demonstrations at two sites in Cairo demanding the restoration of the president. On 14 August, the military attacked them, perpetrating one of the largest single-day massacres of protestors in recent history. Sisi, who reinstalled himself as leader after the coup and then won the post-coup election, assumed dictatorial powers and elevated state repression to levels that exceed those during Mubarak's reign (Abd el-Fattah, 2022). In Libya, the uprising devolved almost immediately into a civil war and, while the long-serving dictator, Muammar Qaddafi, was ousted by rebel militias (and then killed), armed struggles for power are ongoing, sustaining complex constellations of political instability and violence. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates had been upgrading their militarized their brand of geopolitical Sunni sectarianism in the Arabian Peninsula, which was brought to force during the Arab spring at the behest of the Bahraini regime to put down pro-democracy protests, enabling the al-Khalifa monarchy to sustain its repressive capacity and the second-class status of the country's Shi'i majority. In Morocco, some cosmetic legal reforms were instituted to assuage public unrest, but kingly autocracy maintains its firm grip on political life and dissent continues to be repressed. Tunisia was the one country that made significant democratic gains as a direct result of the Arab spring and it was a stable outlier in the region—until 2022 when the current president, Kais Saied, began to reinstitute dictatorial powers and eliminate hard-fought freedoms (Megerisi, 2023).

How can we understand and assess the relationship between the Arab uprisings and the bleak state of affairs in the contemporary Arab world? Many scholars and political observers have sought to address this question, whether through the analytical lens of social movements, contentious politics, political economy, authoritarian durability, or transitional justice. Shamiran Mako and Valentine Moghadam's *After the Arab Uprisings* provides a comprehensive assessment of this voluminous literature and a sophisticated appraisal of the value and limitations of competing paradigms. Their book can be a source for answers to this question of the relationship between the uprisings and the contemporary state of affairs in the region writ large. But this is not the question that guides them. Rather, they address why the Arab uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and Libya were met with different kinds of regime responses and why they resulted in different kinds of outcomes.

The 'after' in their title is somewhat misleading because it captures only part of the book's important contribution to scholarly literature on political conflicts and social change in the contemporary Arab world. The Arab uprisings constitute a temporal middle, with as much attention devoted to the before as the after.

Mako and Moghadam contextualize and historicize four interconnected and mutually reinforcing variables to construct their conceptual framework: (1) the state and the country's political institutions, including regime type and the nature of the political system, state ideology, the role of the military in national affairs, and state capacity; (2) civil society as assessed through the presence, strength, and relative autonomy of civil society organizations, including trade unions, human rights organizations, professional associations, feminist groups, and religious institutions;

(3) gender relations and women's mobilization, which encompasses women's legal status and the nature of family laws, women's public visibility and influence, economic participation, and the absence or presence of pro-women policies and programs; and (4) international connections, from alliances and foreign aid programs to foreign military involvement or interventions. These variables are the building blocks for their integrated theoretical framework, which they apply to produce a stellar comparative analysis of the seven countries that are the focus of the book.

As a political sociologist, I am inclined to privilege the state as the preeminent explanatory variable to understand all that ails or aids a country (Hajjar, 2004). Mako and Moghadam's book can be read as a validation of this perspective because the state looms large in discussions of every variable in the conceptual framework. While every Arab state in this study is authoritarian, authoritarianism varies, and the differences help explain the characteristics and contours of every other category. For example, the patriarchal power, institutions, and ideologies of monarchies are directly related to certain kinds of expectations for civil society; if the ideal of obedience starts to rupture beyond 'the usual suspects', as it did so dramatically during the Arab spring, the monarch may operationalize a superficial benevolence by fiddling with the law to clear the streets (Morocco) or invoke the brotherhood of kings for help restoring 'order' and societal submission by force (Bahrain). Dictatorships in which power is personal (Qaddafi's Libya, Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad's Syria) or concentrated in the high echelons of the military (Mubarak's and Sisi's Egypt) are ideologically and institutionally predisposed to regard and treat anything but political quiescence as treason or 'terrorism' and, being unbeholden to society, respond to unrest and dissent by directing state forces (military, police, and secret service) to wage war on enemies within.

The state is obviously key to understanding a country's position in the global order, including its foreign relations, and foreign interests or designs upon the country. The most violent responses to domestic uprisings and the worst outcomes vis-à-vis protestor demands for democratization occurred in the countries where external actors intervened, whether in support for or opposition to the state. The Syrian regime was aided in its efforts to crush regime opponents by direct interventions from Russia and Iran, and the groups—both armed and civilian—opposing the regime obtained little support and more exposure to violence as a result of fluctuating US intervention. In Libya, the regime's fierce response to the uprising that began in Benghazi raised international fears—whether real or opportunistic—of an impending humanitarian disaster, and the new and heretofore untested principle of 'Responsibility to Protect' (R2P) was recruited to justify armed foreign intervention. Without Saudi political meddling in Yemen's transitional process and then the framing of the civil war as proxy war waged by Iran to justify military intervention, it is highly unlikely that the outcome of the uprising in that country would have been such pure devastation.

Mako and Moghadam's chapter on civil society is a tour de force social history of Arab societies from the 1950s to the present. Rather than saddling their analysis to either the perspective that civil society is a sphere separate and autonomous from the state or the perspective that it is a vessel of the state that serves to maintain and legitimize the status quo, they argue that the nature of civil society in every country is an empirical question whose answers must be mined from context-specific and historically grounded material. They pay due attention to the post-independence forms and structures of state-led socioeconomic development in some countries and the transformational ramifications of neoliberalism which has become hegemonic regionwide since the 1980s but with distinct and varying effects within countries and across time.

Of all the associational components of civil society, when it comes to understanding the Arab uprisings, including the contextually specific environments and the differing outcomes of mass unrest, pride of place goes to non-governmental organizations. Mako and Moghadam offer a clear and comparative account of the history of organizations established to promote human rights,

women's rights, workers' rights, and other civic interests. Prior to the uprisings, in some countries, the civic associational landscape was dominated by religious conservatives (Egypt), while in other countries, religious groups were allies of their authoritarian regimes (Yemen, Morocco) or regime opponents (Syria, Tunisia, Libya). These relations and dynamics largely depended on the relationship between religion and the state and the state's posture toward social forces and organizations devoted to more liberal interests and progressive social policies.

Human rights and women's rights organizations in Tunisia and Morocco, and to a lesser extent Egypt which Mako and Moghadam describe as 'anomalous', had worked to develop heterogeneous bases of support for their liberalizing agendas. These organizations could be credited not for 'leading' the uprisings—which, anyway, were largely leaderless—but for promoting discursive frames that were popularized in protesters' cries for freedom, justice, bread, and dignity. In the decades that preceded the Arab spring, the discourse of human rights became increasingly salient in the public sphere, including the media, the goals and objectives of some political opposition groups, and even official discourses. The roots of such 'vernacularization of human rights' (Merry, 2006) trace back to the 1970s and 1980s with the creation of new international laws and the substantive entitlements and socio-political and legal arrangements they would require. Human rights laws were promulgated to represent and advance pre-existing demands and expectations. In other words, demands and expectations symbolized by cries for freedom, justice, bread, and dignity were not created by human rights. Rather, the opposite is true. The after-uprising outcomes of those demands for rights and the fate of countries' nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society more broadly were heavily predicated on state interests and capacities. Tunisia and Morocco, and for a brief period Egypt and Yemen, saw some efforts to institute liberalizing political reforms. But nowhere did the uprising produce outcomes that improved the economic welfare of the majority of society or alter entrenched neoliberal political economies that depend on and exacerbate inequalities or explode webs of corruption that run through the state.

The explanatory power and importance that Mako and Moghadam ascribe to gender mobilization and the status of women is a distinguishing feature of their analysis. Drawing on feminist research, they contend that women's status and rights are broadly important at the society-wide level in at least three ways. First, countries where gender inequality is greater are more prone to violent intra- and interstate conflicts and, conversely, where women have a strong presence in civil society, violence is a less likely or less extreme response to conflict. They cite research by the WomanStats project to validate their empirical findings that 'the equality of women within countries is the best predictor—better than the degree of democracy and better than level of wealth, income inequality, or ethno-religious identity—of how peaceful or conflict-ridden their countries are' (p. 16). Indeed, the countries in their study where women's organizing was strongest and longest and their rights were, relatively speaking, better protected—Tunisia and Morocco—experienced less violent state responses to the uprisings and produced better outcomes for all of society. Second, women's capacity for autonomous organizing in civil society accounts for the institution of progressive social policies, including but not limited to those affecting women. Third, any democratization process in which women are not included or not treated as social equals will always be partial or even impossible. Appreciating the centrality and importance of women's status and mobilization as an independent variable should be adopted by anyone who seeks explanations for the bleak state of affairs in the contemporary Arab region.

Mako and Moghadam have produced a theoretically sophisticated and empirically grounded model for comparative analysis. This book deserves to be emulated and taught by other scholars, and certainly not only those who work on the Middle East.

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