INSTITUTIONS IN ACTION

Why Did the Arab Spring of 2011 Occur?

In Chapter 1, we began this book with a puzzle: Why did the Arab Spring take place, and why did these uprisings lead to such different results in different countries? Revolutions and transitions often seem to come out of the blue. Regimes that appeared impervious to change a year earlier are swept away before our eyes. No one expected that communism would collapse in Eastern Europe in the 1980s; at best, it seemed, reforms within the Soviet Union would lead to some modest liberalization, perhaps even reinvigorating the one-party regimes in the region. Just the opposite occurred.

In the more recent case of the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East, the signs were even less promising. Modernization in the region is often viewed as stunted. If we turn to the Human Development Index (see Chapter 4), we find development is especially lagging in levels of education and health care. This is true even in countries with significant natural resources, like Saudi Arabia, whose life expectancy trails that of much poorer China. Gender inequalities are also significant.

Oil, as well as foreign aid from the United States in particular, has helped support many of these states, creating systems built around a coterie of supporters who benefit directly from the state. These elite groups have relied on various means of repression—harassing, jailing, and killing opponents—to maintain their control over the state and the benefits they have drawn from it.

Civil society in much of the region is weak and fragmented, a result of state repression and low levels of development. Democratization and liberalization are ideas tainted by their association with Western colonialism and U.S. foreign policy in the region, particularly after the invasion of Iraq. There is wariness of U.S. foreign policy, which for many years has supported nondemocratic regimes in the region.

How, then, in the face of all these challenges, did the Arab Spring burst forth? Why revolutions break out when they do is beyond the understanding of social scientists, much as geologists cannot simply tell us when an earthquake is going to occur. But to make some sense of these changes, we can turn to our institutional, ideational, and individual explanations. These explanations are not comprehensive but rather point to the complexity of revolutionary change.

Institutional explanations for the Arab Spring focus on the nature of authoritarian rule. For example, while Tunisia functioned as a highly repressive one-party system that sought to co-opt or control civil society, its regime also maintained just a small military force and a limited degree of patrimonialism. Thus, when protests intensified, the military refused to fire on the population, helping pave the way for revolution and democratization. In contrast, as we mentioned at the start of this chapter, Syria's highly patrimonial regime has relied largely on armed forces directly controlled by the ruling Assad family, giving those in power both the desire and the means to use violence against their opponents. Egypt seems to fall somewhere between the two, where the military first sided with revolutionaries but also had the capacity to seize power for itself, which it eventually did. Institutions like the military cannot fully account

for why revolution succeeded where it did, but they can be seen to have influenced the resources and strategies of political elites across the various cases.

Ideational explanations are similarly useful. In the case of Egypt, many point to the role young people played in shaping the message of the protests that brought down President Hosni Mubarak. Their April 6 Youth Movement studied how public protests brought down authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe. To mobilize the public, activists relied on Facebook and YouTube, prompting the regime to cut off Internet access in a failed last-ditch effort to fend off the revolution. The role of Islam as a democratic or fundamentalist force across the region is also central to any understanding of political change. The rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt polarized the population, paving the way for a military coup in 2013, whereas in Tunisia the Islamist Ennahda Party supported a democratic and secular constitution, making that country the only one to successfully transition to democracy as a result of the Arab Spring.

Finally, we should not discount the role of individual action, which sparked these revolutions. Mohamed Bouazizi was a 26-year-old Tunisian man who had worked from a young age to support his family, selling produce as a street vendor. The police repeatedly harassed Bouazizi, ostensibly for lacking a business license but in reality because he failed to pay bribes. These repeated assaults took their toll; as his sister later noted, "those with no connections and no money for bribes are humiliated and insulted and not allowed to live."[a] After a final clash in December 2010, Bouazizi stood before the local governor's office, amid the traffic, where he doused himself in gasoline and set himself alight. Protests began soon thereafter and spread across the region, raising common demands: dignity and change. Large-scale, domestic and international, and state and societal forces were critical in explaining the Arab Spring (and all revolutions), but we should not forget the role of one apparently powerless person in shaping history.

Egyptian protesters gather at Tahrir Square, Cairo, at the start of the Egyptian Revolution in 2011.

1. What institutional factors help explain why Tunisia's revolution took such a different shape from Syria's?
2. How did institutional and ideational factors combine in the case of Egypt to spur its revolution?
3. Why did revolution overturning authoritarian regimes in the Middle East seem so unlikely in the first place?