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It's spring again

The revolution has returned to the Middle East. Young people are protesting corruption and the lack of future prospects

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Recent images from Beirut, Algiers, Khartoum and Baghdad are eerily familiar: demonstrators occupying public spaces and engaging in street battles with the police. Graffiti is daubed on vans of overstretched security forces, who often hit back as brutally as they did eight years ago. Even the iconic battle-cry 'bread, freedom, social justice, human dignity' is back.

The striking similarities between current events and the 2011 protests have left all those speechless who had pronounced an irrevocable end to social movements and the failure of the 'Arab Spring' in the Middle East and North Africa. Back in 2011, the upheaval that swept through nearly all countries in the region destabilised republican regimes in particular. Their rulers were unable to legitimise their autocratic grip on power through historic dynastic succession. Consequently, elite networks crumbled in many republics under the pressure of public dissent.

Some republics escaped this fate only because of deep-seated societal trauma born of violence in the recent past. Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan – unlike Tunisia and Egypt – had experienced violent political crises in recent decades in the form of civil wars and external military interventions. Painful memories of those times ensured that enthusiasm for further political turmoil was muted at best. Looking at the region these days, it seems as if the Arab Spring is now re-emerging in these very states.

Resistance is spreading around the region

Of all places, the fight for political participation, social justice and a dignified life has been resumed in Sudan, where internal violence last

flared up just a few years ago: in December 2018, spiralling inflation and cuts in bread and petrol subsidies brought thousands onto the streets of Khartoum. All attempts to pacify the population with cosmetic reforms proved fruitless. On 11 April 2019, the military forced despot Omar al-Bashir to resign – after more than 30 years in power.

Next, in mid-February 2019, protests were sparked in Algeria by the ageing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to stand for a fifth term after decades in power. In autumn, the protests spread to other republics in the region.

In Iraq, spontaneous mass protests in October led to several days of unrest after the security forces fired on demonstrators, killing over a hundred and injuring thousands more. Bloody confrontations have been fuelling a spiral of violence ever since.

Lebanon and its 'October Revolution' are still making headlines to date. Here, the resistance on the streets was initially aimed at the government's fiscal policy and absurd taxation plans. In next to no time, the demonstrations morphed into the biggest mass protests since the end of the civil war.

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Even Egypt, where the fight for social and political participation was already thought to be lost, is affected. Although (or perhaps because?) Al-Sisi's security forces routinely take hugely repressive action against demonstrators and torture and kidnap dissidents, thousands clamoured for the fall of the regime in September for the first time in years.While the state security forces managed to bring the movement under control through repression, the country now seems less stable than previously assumed. This also applies to some of the monarchies that saw off the upheaval in 2011 with a mix of repression, co-optative measures and selective reforms. For example, Jordan experienced the longest public-sector strike in the country's history in September. More than 100,000 striking teachers plunged the government into a deep political crisis.

Economic ills remain

So is this a new wave of the Arab Spring? It could be. The protesters are similarly diverse, combining workers, youth organisations and opposition parties. They are led by students and young people – often women – who, unlike their parents' generation, are less shaped by civil war or the violent experiences of the 'first' Arab Spring. As in 2011, the new protest movements are predominantly horizontally organised. With hardly any recognisable hierarchies, the protesting coalitions insulated themselves against attempts of co-optation by ruling elites. They thereby emulate the model of the 'leaderless revolutions' of 2011.

Similarly, the protesters draw on a battle-tested repertoire of contention and proven modes of action. They chant familiar revolutionary slogans, thus capitalising on the affective archive of the Arab Spring. Yet, there's one crucial difference between 2011 and 2019: this time, the driving forces seem mainly of a socio-economic nature. While freedom and equal rights remain important, the eminent focus is now on corruption and social issues.

The new protests are chiefly fuelled by a loss of trust in the ruling political class among the young generation, many of whom are unemployed and have little future prospects. Even eight years after the Arab Spring, economic ills remain – and have got even worse in many cases. Take the situation in Algeria: In what is actually a rich country that covers 70 per cent of its macroeconomic consumption through imports, foreign currency reserves have fallen by two thirds in the last five years following the drop in oil prices.

As for Iraq, its economy, too, has been suffering from the consequences of several decades of conflict since 2011. The outbreak of civil war in neighbouring Syria and the Islamic State's advance into Mosul fanned the flames further. Rather than heralding a new dawn, the proclaimed victory over the jihadists in 2017 cemented the elite networks in Baghdad. It's a similar situation in Lebanon, with a severe economic and financial crisis resulting from sectarian conflicts, civil war and mismanagement. The country is on the brink of bankruptcy, while oligarchical structures are a barrier to essential reforms.

In the rest of the region, too, foreign currency shortages, currency depreciation and rising inflation are also symptoms of cronyism, dysfunctional rentier economies and rampant corruption. Therefore, it's no coincidence that protests keep on being triggered by events that show the kleptocratic elites at their worst. Take Lebanon, for instance, where the information minister announced a tax on Internet-based messaging

services such as WhatsApp that had hitherto undermined the monopoly of influential family clans in the telecommunications sector. Or Egypt, where a developer who, as a subcontractor for the army, enriched himself for years through government contracts disclosed scandalous details of the embezzlement of billions in state funds in a video message sent from exile.

The protesters' lessons from the past

As 2011 showed, the outcome of spontaneous movements of this kind is hard to predict. All the more reason for governments in the region and beyond to prepare themselves, especially as the 'second wave' of the Arab Spring is likely to escalate in different ways from its successor. After all, both sides have learned from experience.

Following the Arab Spring, the authoritarian regimes in the region initially adapted by imitating each other's repression tactics, systematically upgrading their security apparatus and taking measures to prevent new uprisings through cosmetic reforms and co-optation. As the massacres of civilians in Iraq and Sudan have shown, the idea that repression is only partially effective in breaking social resistance is yet to catch on here.

It remains to be seen whether the mass movements will achieve lasting change to the region's oligarchical power structures that have become established over decades.

At the same time, Arab civil society is learning, too. This is not only apparent at a tactical level. The most important lesson of the Arab Spring is that a revolution's success cannot be measured by the fall of a dictator. Rather, this merely marks the start of deeper transformation. In Algeria, protesters remain on the street some six months after Bouteflika's resignation and are wrangling with the army over a process of structural change instead of cosmetic reforms.

In Sudan, despite brutal repression, the movement started to recede only when civilian stakeholders and the military negotiated an agreement on a three-year transition phase. And in Lebanon, hundreds of thousands saw the resignation of Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri against the will of his coalition partner, the influential Hezbollah, as no more than a partial victory. They are now calling for a technocratic government and, in the medium term, the total abolition of the sectarian system of proportional representation under which the key offices of state are currently allocated in Lebanon's democracy. The protesters' awareness of past mistakes and commitment to the long game is also reflected by their chants, such as the popular slogan 'Either we win or we become Egypt'.

Europe's historic opportunity

It remains to be seen whether the mass movements will achieve lasting change to the region's oligarchical power structures that have become established over decades. However, Europe should heed their rallying cries, which suggest that the region will not calm down overnight. So far, the response in the West has been shy, to say the least. Given the sobering outcome of the 'first' Arab Spring, the international community's enthusiasm is rather mild.

There are concerns in Berlin and Brussels that Sudan could turn into another Libya and that Algeria would mirror the 'Egyptian scenario'. Furthermore, Europe's helpless migration policy and the fear of a new wave of conflict refugees from the Middle East and North Africa seem to hamper decision-makers' willingness to provide vocal support to the new protest movements.

The European response to the protests is so mute not least because the established democracies themselves are currently contending with nationalism and the erosion of democratic rules. When your own house is on fire, it's harder to see across the Mediterranean.

This reluctance to act is understandable, but dangerous. It risks other players stepping up their authoritarian presence on the stage of the Middle East and North Africa. For several years now, Russia's military involvement in Syria has been sending out the message that it's standing by its allies in the region, unlike the West.Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are also investing huge sums in grooming and protecting allied autocrats – even though they themselves have not been affected by uprisings. The fruits of this approach can be seen in Egypt, where a counter-revolution has seen thousands killed and tens of thousands injured or held as political prisoners. Or in Libya, where a former military general has been waging a campaign since last spring against the central government recognised by Germany and others. Then, of course, there are Yemen and Syria.

Like the regimes and activists in the region, Europe's political decision-makers must also learn from past mistakes: for instance, that generals do not make reliable partners for democratic transitions; that activists become easy targets for security services as soon as mass protests start to thin out; that neoliberal structural reforms only exacerbate social crises in the region; and that repressive responses to protests can rapidly turn into violent conflicts on Europe's doorstep – with irreversible consequences that also affect European societies.

Whether or not it constitutes a second or merely a continuation of the first Arab Spring, the current wave of uprisings gives Europe a second chance: to resolutely support socio-economic and political participation after lacking the courage in 2011; to look more closely at where promises of democratic reform from chastened monarchs or military-backed interim governments were believed too easily in 2012 and 2013; and to be on hand with financial and technical support where rulers show a genuine willingness to renegotiate the social contract with their people. Europe should not miss this historic opportunity.



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