Bliss was it during those rebellions to be alive, and to be young, on the streets, was very heaven. Or so it seemed to millions of women and men in early 2011, shortly after the first protests in Tunisia rocked the foundations of the whole Arab world. Public ecstasy flourished. Freed from fear, often for the first time, citizens found themselves dancing, singing and kissing strangers in the streets. They talked of dignity and justice, freedom and democracy. Bin Laden was bypassed. Political exiles came home. The first fair and clean elections in living memory happened. Monarchs wooed parliaments. Dictators were everywhere pushed onto the back foot. Several were toppled; a few went on trial, or fled into exile; others, among them Gaddafi and al-Assad, fought back, like maniacs, using murderous tactics and weapons.

Still in their infancy, the popular upheavals have shaken practically every political regime within a swathe of territory stretching from Morocco through Egypt and the Gulf states to the Levant and beyond, to Iraq and Iran. During the first few months, the radical democratic spirit of the rebellions was striking, in several ways. Judged comparatively, they took the 1989 spirit of non-violent velvet rebellions in central-eastern Europe to higher levels. Faced by much worse state violence and terror, the Arab uprisings drew the poison of state violence. Remarkable was their sensitivity to the grave dangers and high costs of using violent means to get their way.

Judged by global standards, the revolutionary identification with the theory and practice of civil society (*al-mutjama’ al-madani*) was nothing new, but it helps explain the unusual affection for public space. Past revolutions witnessed the storming of the presumed Bastilles of power: government headquarters, presidential palaces, post offices and telecommunications buildings were the usual targets of public action. The Arab upheavals rejected the principle of sovereign power in this sense. They instead embraced public space.

Sites of refusal of concentrated violent power, places like Boulevard Habib Bourguiba, Tahrir Square and Pearl Square meant different things to many people. They functioned as reminders that ruling powers always depend upon the consent of the powerless. They were gatherings of the afraid, calls for others to join the resistance, places where the act of gathering consoled, discharged fears and raised hopes. The public sites of resistance were zones of joy fed by poetry, music and literature; spaces of unfettered discussion and the feverish making of political plans. They were also broadcasting studios, political commentary boxes that issued calls for others to take note of their demands, to witness their calls for justice and democratic freedom.

The struggles for public space for a time proved infectious throughout the region. These were not straightforwardly twitter rebellions or Facebook revolutions. Fuelled by material poverty and political injustice, these uprisings were marked by an unusual public awareness of the political importance of digitally networked media. Thanks to outlets such as *Al Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*, never before did so many people instantly witness dramatic political events on a global scale. Citizens understood that news is by definition powerful information still unknown to others, which helps explain the remarkable first-time experiments in the arts of gathering and circulating news. Huge crowds in Alexandria...
watched themselves live on satellite television, hoping the coverage would pro-
tect them from police or military annihilation. Helped by web platforms oper-
ated by exiles, tweets and blogs and video footage uploaded onto the Internet
powerfully described situations both terrible and hopeful. Everything, even the
shooting of protesters and innocent bystanders at point-blank range, was re-
corded for posterity, in real time.

Two years later, all things considered, have the convulsions in the Arab world
been a boon for the spirit and institutions of power-sharing democracy?

It’s much too early to tell. It must be remembered that revolutions resemble
extended earthquakes. Their historical significance is known only well after
their onset. Revolutions take time. They have their own time. They alter people’s
perception of time, multiply their doubts and add to their list of unknowns.

Look carefully at the present mixed-up trends. The tough job of transforming
corrupted police states into power-sharing democracies that foster social and
environmental justice has barely begun. It is early days for electoral systems,
competitive political parties, feisty parliaments, independent judiciaries, and
constitutions fit for democracy. Uncorrupted watchdog and guide-dog institu-
tions, independently-minded scrutiny bodies that are essential conditions of
monitory democracy, are weak.

Throughout the region, many not-so-new forces are on the loose. The power of
the military and disaffected elites to wreck a transition to democracy remains.
Memories of terrible uncivil wars, of the Algerian type, are plentiful; but so, too,
are stocks of weapons in private hands. Poverty of heart-breaking proportions
and unemployment, particularly among young people, are rife. Healthcare, hous-
ing, and other basic public service amenities are in short supply: chains of mar-
ket production and distribution remain broken. Dysfunctional households, shat-
ered by poverty and victimized by violence, are commonplace.

The list of challenges is long, and may well grow longer. Judged in terms of
democratic principles, the most striking fact about the region is its utter contra-
dictoriness. Many novel things are happening. Political Islamists are on the rise.
They are challenging the standard political science presumption that democracy
requires a binding sense of national identity backed by a sovereign territorial
state. Public vows of support for brothers and sisters of the wider ummah are
common. Regional political thinking is a felt imperative. How to re-shape the
region politically is another matter; but political Islam has managed for the mo-
ment to breathe life into the body of post-national democratic ideals.

Nationalist impulses are weakened by multiple factors. There is plenty of patrio-
tism framed by vibrant local dialects. The common language of Arabic and
shared traditions play a significant role. There is a vibrant sense of the impor-
tance of spreading news and building cross-border interactions and the need
for people of one country to learn from citizens of other countries. The wide-
spread perception of a common opponent (police state dictatorships backed by
the West) plays a role, as does the deliberate production and circulation of a
common democratic rhetoric of political symbols and tactics.

Religious secularity also serves to prevent outbreaks of nationalism. The strange
oxymoron is needed to make sense of the Arab world convulsions. Infused with
a spirit of religious secularity, the great upheavals have called into question the
old European modernist presumption that secularity is the foe and successor of
religion. In Tunisia, Rashid Ghanouchi’s public affirmation of the principle of
religious compromise (wasatiyyah) based on respect for both worldliness and
belief in God captures the trend. Hence calls for the separation of the state and
religion have been as rare as their opposite, demands (for instance by Yemeni
cleric al-Zindani) for the replacement of existing forms of government with an
Islamic state.

If political Islam feeds the new democratic virtue of religious secularity, bitter
public resistance to the drafting and adoption of the new Egyptian constitution

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and the recent murder of Tunisian opposition leader Shokri Belaid show how
the resurgence of religiosity is a deeply conflicted political trend. Seen in terms
of a transition to democracy, political Islam has to perform delicate balancing
acts: it must satisfy its militant supporters with substantial domestic reforms;
outflank armed resistance and neutralise military opposition; negotiate with the
West; forge different relationships with the states of Israel and Iran; and push
towards a new regional settlement that remains as yet undefined.

Matters are complicated by regional power vacuums and double standards. The
bell tolls for Western hypocrisy. The popular rebellions shattered the dalliance
with Gaddafi's oil-and-gas rich Libya. The heavy investment of the United States
and Israel in dependable police dictatorships (Mubarak's Egypt, al-Assad's Syria,
Saleh's Yemen) was undermined. The status quo snapped.

Yet, for the moment, the outcomes have crazed qualities. The fading imperial de-
mocracy, the United States, backs Israel, a state whose political leaders talk democ-
racy and human rights yet exclude their own Arab subjects, build walls around
Palestinian people, whose enforced patience with their miserable lot cannot last.
The American democracy brought massive violence and suffering to Iraq, which
now resembles a comprador state aligned with Iran, which backs the criminal Syr-
ian regime, which the United States wants to axe. In support of "democracy" against
"terror", American drones, their use unsanctioned by Congress, kill and terrorise
people, many Muslims among them. The United States and its Western allies mean-
while back rich little Qatar. Home to Al Jazeera, a vital spreader of democratic val-
ues, Qatar helps fund and support Hamas, which in the name of self-determination
crushes dissent within its own ranks. The Western-backed Saudi Arabia dictator-
ship clings on for dear life, fears its own people, whom it plies with lavish hand-
outs, knowing that they're ultimately the source of its own repressive power.

That's not the end of Western democratic double standards. The United States
and its Western allies silently consent to martial law and terror in Bahrain,
whose oppressed Shiite majority refuse violence and champion the cause of
democracy and human rights against a Sunni monarchy backed by Saudi Arabia
and other Gulf states. The West finds a new ally in the Muslim Brotherhood gov-
ernment of Egypt, whose democratically elected president, Mohamed Morsi talks
like Robespierre: "My duty is to move forward with the goals of the revolution
and eliminate all obstacles from the past".

Political Islamists like Morsi are learning that democratisation is a wild horse.
They hunger for state power; after a long history of underground resistance and
suffering, understandably they don't want to squander deserved gains. Yet in
Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the epicentre of the upheavals, political Islamists are
discovering that electoral victory and governing often require give-and-take
pragmatism. As they set their sights on state power, they're learning as well that
state structures, where they exist, have been twice cursed by colonialism: their
efficiency and effectiveness are limited and, in the eyes of many people, they're
simply not legitimate. That's why those who occupy the seats of state power in
the name of the people quickly find themselves opposed by long queues of real
people: trade unionists, liberal minorities, salafis hostile to women, atheists, old-
fashioned secularists, Arab nationalists.

Unfamiliar dynamics multiply; the social science habit of dissecting trends to
discover their single meaning proves unhelpful. Jihadis contest elections, which
they otherwise denounce as an insult to God's sovereignty. Protests against un-
employment, government corruption and state violence erupt. Recent distur-
bances (November 2012) in the Tunisian city of Siliana show that Islamist gov-
ernments committed to justice are readily accused of propping up systems of
injustice. A new regional power, Turkey, itself caught up in an unprecedented
democratic transition that defies most textbook descriptions, meanwhile in-
dulges the contradictions. Committed to destroying the al-Assad regime in Syr-
 ia, sensing that the terrible violence in that country is a proxy regional war, the
Turkish government finds itself in the company of a strange assortment of po-
itical animals, including militant Kurds, whose struggles for self-determination
it does everything to crush.
The ramshackle democracy called Lebanon, governed by a fragile coalition of parties backed by Hezbollah, a supporter of the Syrian dictatorship, harbours violent forces hostile to democracy. Throughout the region, the rule is clear: without a vibrant civil society backed by respect for local versions of human rights and the rule of law, the push for democracy hands opportunities to militias, shadowy armed networks, criminal gangs, kidnappers, assassins. Strange but true: as in Yemen, Syria and Libya, the fight for justice through new forms of democracy breeds new patterns of violent death and destruction.

And so the contraries multiply. Two years after the first breakthroughs, democratic principles are everywhere contradicted by struggles for power that bear little or no resemblance to professed intentions, or defined strategies. Where will all this end? What will historians say in fifty years from now when they look back on the region? Everybody wants to be on the winning side of history, yet nobody knows which side is right, or what winning might mean, or how to get there. Only one thing is certain: the present trends, suffused with contradictions, are not sustainable.

References


