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Abstract

The Arab Spring startled all Arab autocrats but toppled few of them. We find there were no structural preconditions for popular uprisings, but two variables conditioned whether domestic opposition would succeed. First, oil wealth gave rulers the resources to preempt or repress dissent. Second, a precedent of hereditary succession signaled the loyalty of the coercive apparatus to the ruler. Consequently, mass revolts deposed incumbents in only the three non-oil rich, non-hereditary regimes of Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. Where oil rents or hereditary rule prevailed, regimes violently suppressed peaceful protests (Bahrain, Syria) and only lost power through foreign-imposed regime change (Libya).

Tracking the “Arab Spring”

WHY THE MODEST HARVEST?

Jason Brownlee, Tarek Masoud, and Andrew Reynolds

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Nearly three years after the Arab uprisings began, democracy remains elusive in the Middle East. Tunisians, who lit the torch of revolution in December 2010, now walk a precarious line between institutional reform and social violence. In Egypt, a fitful transition to democracy, marked by intense polarization between Islamists and their opponents, seems to have been stopped in its tracks by a military coup and follow-on strife. More than a year after the overthrow of Yemen’s dictator, that country has yet to hold multiparty elections for a new government. Meanwhile, violent militias and endemic state weakness threaten Libya’s democratic experiment. And those are the “success stories.” Elsewhere in the Arab world, uprisings have subsided or never materialized. The Bahraini monarchy literally beat its opponents into submission. In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad’s war on his own country has killed or rendered homeless tens of thousands. In eight more Arab-majority countries, autocrats have yet to face any concerted challenge.

The Arab Spring that resides in the popular imagination is one in which a wave of mass mobilization swept the broader Middle East, toppled dictators, and cleared the way for democracy. The reality is that few Arab countries have experienced anything of the sort. The Arab Spring’s modest harvest—a record far less inspiring than those of the East European revolutions of 1989 or sub-Saharan Africa’s political transitions in the early 1990s—cries out for explanation. Why did regime change, which we conservatively define as merely the replacement of a dictator rather than the installation of a democracy, take place in only four of fourteen Arab countries?

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