



The Arab Spring in The Arab World: Is Islamism a Factor? A Case Study of Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Chains of disconcerting revolutions that engulfed the Arab World years back indicated the willingness of the citizenry to bring the years of denial, corruption, humiliation, oppression to a hasty end. This event started off with Tunisia in December 2010. The magnitude with which it speeded to other countries coupled with the debilitating consequences it left behind engulfed the attention of scholars, politicians, to mention but two.

Using Tunisia's revolution as a case study. The overriding purpose of this research paper was to determine the underlying factors behind the Arab spring, with a particular attention on Islamism as a factor. Using the existing literature, this paper concluded that, the series of uprisings that engulfed the Arab countries had Islamism agenda or Islamists elements behind it, and that other factors were symptoms of the profound weakened political structure across the Arab countries for ages. It would, therefore, not be proper to relegate Islamism in these events. The study, therefore, called on future researchers to critically look into the underlying factors leading to Arab Spring using quantitative methods with open-ended questions, and with special attention on Political Islam.

Indexing terms/Keywords: Arab Spring, Islamism (Political Islam), Arab World, Tunisia and Social Constructivism

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1. INTRODUCTION AND DISCUSSIONS

Chains of disconcerting revolutions that engulfed the Arab World years back indicated the willingness of the citizenry to bring the years of denial, corruption, humiliation, oppression to a hasty end. In Tunisia for instance, Muhammad Bouazizi on 17 December 2010, set himself on fire in a totally distressed disapproval of humiliation meted out to him by the policy, amidst other socioeconomic deprivations. This spurred demonstrations, riots, civil war, political unrest [be it violent or of any kind], and a slow political response from Zine El- Abidine Ben Ali's regime resulted in Jasmine Revolution and consequently spread out the countries of the Arab League such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria.

Sequences of alarming revolutions that led to the overthrow of regimes became known as the Arab Spring—series of anti-government protests, uprisings and armed rebellions that spread across the Arab world in early 2011. The Arab Spring as a term was coined in reference to the 1848 Spring of Nations and was globalised by the Western media in early 2011 when Tunisians revolution successful ousted Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and incited similar anti-government demonstrations in distant countries in Arab World. The Arab world expands from Morocco across Northern Africa to the Persian Gulf and it is more or less identical to the area known as the Middle East and North Africa (Training & Command, 2006).

From scratch, it generated hosts of perceptions in the international communities and heaps of questions on what triggered these revolutions have been on the desk and lips of scholars, government officials, policymakers and analysts, organisations and among others. And as they attempt to unearth the underlying causes, various factors such as encompasses, economic, social and political have been attributed to it. For instance, Dalacoura argued that socio-economic related problems, pervasive and profound political grievances were the reason for the uprisings (Dalacoura, 2012, p. 66). Ayatollah Khamenei (as cited by Sinkaya, Bayram), however, stated that these economic and social factors "were only symptoms of a deep-seated rage felt across the Islamic world against the West", but, indeed Islamist or Political Islam like Al-Nahda, with its opposing nature incited and supported the revolutionary social movements (Sinkaya, 2015, p. 60). What is Islamism or Politic Islam then?

Purposefully, this paper will not engage in any confusion of Islamism or Political Islam nomenclature, but would rather adhere to these definitions. Mehdi Mozaffari defined Islamism or political Islam as a *religious ideology with a holistic interpretation of Islam* whose final aim is the *conquest of the world by all means*. Mehdi Mozaffari definition made special references to four interconnected rudiments thus, religious ideology, holistic interpretation of Islam, the third conquest of the world, and all means (Mozaffari, 2007, pp. 17-33). According to Mehdi Mozaffari, the holistic interpretation of Islam focuses on absolute indivisibility of the Trinity Dîn [Religion], Dunya [Way of life] and Dawla [Government] – On the Conquest of the world, he argued that the existing world is both wrong and repressive and to get rid of them, the Medina Model and the Classical era of the Caliphate must be 'ideal reference points' - and finally, by all the means stretches from 'propagation, peaceful indoctrination and political struggle to violent methods such as assassination, hostage taking, terrorist and suicide actions, and even massacre of civil populations' (Mozaffari, 2007, pp. 21-24). In Tibi Bassam's opinion, Islamism "is not a religion based morality, rather a concept of political order, which is not a democratic one" (Tibi, 2000, p. 1).

The repercussions of the Arab Springs still obstinately reecho in the affairs inside and outside the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, whereas its long-run impact is yet to be assessed holistically, albeit, it brought down regimes. Anne Applebaum detailed the revolutions that spread out in the Arab world as one that resembles 1848 and not 1989 revolutions in Europe and further stated that "each revolution must be assessed in its own context; each had a distinctive impact. The revolutions spread from one point to another. They interacted to a limited extent—The drama of each revolution unfolded separately. Each had its own heroes, its own crises. Each, therefore, demands its own narrative" (Applebaum, 2011).



This paper seeks to examine the underlying factor behind the Arab Spring with particular attention to ISLAMISM, using Tunisia as a case in point. It also aims at contributing further our understanding of the factors behind the Arab Spring. Methodologically, in order to achieve our primary objectives, the study analyzes the works of renowned researchers from Middle East, Arab World whose work relate to the subject matter of this study, and other academic journals relative to the sociopolitical and economic development of MENA. This study also looks at the Arab spring phenomenon through the lenses of International Relations theory in order to further advance the available theories or fill in the gap (if any) in the existing studies regarding the Arab springs and its related issues.

Organizationally, this paper has three sections; the first section of this study captures the Socioeconomic and Political Structure of Tunisia, and Islamism or Political Islam in Tunisia. The second section attempts to explain or examine the events using theory (Social Constructivism) from the field of international relations. And finally, the last section engages in contents analysis of the existing literature and conclusion. Materials for this study are secondary data such as academic journals and papers, media reports, newspapers, conference papers and Internet-based search engines.

2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF TUNISIA BEFORE THE ARAB SPRING AND ISLAMISM (POLITICAL ISLAM)

2.1. POLITICAL STRUCTURE

Tunisia, a country in northern African shares a common border with Algeria, Libya, and the Mediterranean Sea. Scholars have linked the political history of Tunisians to President Bourguiba as principal architect, and his Socialist Destourian Party, birthed in 1934 to liberate themselves from the political influence and direction of France.

On November 7, 1987, Ben Ali had via disheartening coup dethroned Habib Bourguiba and assured democratic ruling which Tunisians greeted with many expectations. In the opinion of Clement M. Henry, the political nature of Tunisia was an anachronism, a highly developed police state designed to perpetuate the autocratic rule of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali (Henry, 2011). Gen. Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, tenure was characterised by repression, a poor human rights record, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and growing anti-Western sentiments among the populace.

Opposition parties had no power to initiate any actions or practicable exercise against the government whereas ruling party's domination perpetuates unperturbed. There was no checks and balances on the executive arm of government and, no accountability to the parliament as well. Again, there was minimal freedom of speech and press. The state was actively involved in monitoring and controlling media houses and both online and print media publications. The Ben Ali administration came out with a highly refined framework for monitoring the internet to identify and disrupt political and activist activity online (Henry, 2011).

Furthermore, some journalists suffered brutality and others imprisoned because they criticised the allegedly corrupt nature of government officials. Some political advocates were not welcomed, and independent activists were brutalised. Also, the penal code in June 2010 through the parliament was amended to criminalize the actions of individuals who directly or indirectly engage foreign institution or organization to encourage manipulates with the vital interests of Tunisia and its economic security.

2.2. TUNISIA'S ECONOMY

Prior to the Jasmine Revolution, Tunisia was doing better than Algeria and Libya's economy. Its domestic and external economic imbalances were under control. Its per capita income reached \$3,720 by the end of 2010. Its economy was relatively diversified, with the service sector being very instrumental. Agricultural production and tourism sector supported the transformational target and economic development of the Tunisian people. Unlike other MENA countries, Tunisia did not benefit from oil and gas revenues. Going forward, in the 1960s and 1970s the government became determined in its "state-



driven economic strategies”, which generated “only modest economic results” and was “proving fiscally unsustainable” (Paciello, 2011).

Extensively, the regime was able to give economic and social avenues and support to its growing population leading to political stability at the end. Achy Lahcen stated that along the line, the authoritarian bargain, however, broke down as a result of the inability of the “economy to create jobs for educated labour, the proliferation of marginal and poorly paid jobs in the informal sector, and rising income inequality and regional disparities” (Achy, 2011, p. 6). IMF and World Bank assisted Tunisia’s economy but this assistance at the end led the country into deficits. Tunisia devaluated its currency due to its international debt. Consequently, the unemployment rate increased leading to agitations, which led to the destruction of the regime’s legitimacy.

2.3. THE SOCIAL STRUCTURE

In Tunisian society, the state has the ultimate power in social affairs. The state controls individual’s life and ensures that rule and regulations are adhered to. “Non-conformists” were brutalised by the police and their rights were secured by the government of the day. Under the regimes of Bourguiba and Ben Ali civil society increased as part of the general activities of Social Reform. Tunisia’s civil society comprises “thousands of voluntary associations and national organisations” that precede Tunisia’s independence.

Voluntary associations and national organisations such as human rights, women empowerment activities were on a rise but none of such questioned the authorities or directives of the government. Women in Tunisia enjoy some of the greatest rights and freedoms and played an active role in the Arab world. Among the MENA countries, Tunisia women enjoyed a special reputation which was a particular obsession of Bourguiba himself (Hopwood & St. Antony's, 1992). The activities of these groups were under the regulation of the state.

Professionals such as journalists, lawyers, judges, among others faced intensive restrictions and monitoring by the security services, particularly, the police. Rishmawi and Morris characterised the social organisations and activities as prohibited by law from engaging in political activity and must be registered with the Ministry of Interior. Public meetings of NGOs require prior approval from the ministry. Some Human rights activists and defenders were subjected to harassment, intimidation, and detention continuously. Therefore, with the proliferation of these NGOs’ activities and their expansion, the strategy of Tunisian authoritarian regime was to destroy those that it could not control while transforming those it could control into instruments of wider social control; this is a common technique of all totalitarian regimes (Rishmawi & Morris, 2007).

2.4. ISLAMISM OR POLITICAL ISLAM IN TUNISIA

Egypt and Syria through Muslim Brotherhood and the works of Sayyid Qutb introduced Islamism to the Maghreb countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, among others. Across the Maghreb, the Tunisia Movement has the oldest roots of Political Islam (Tibi, 2000). Islamist movement in Tunisia can be traced from 1972, with the arrival of alJama’a al-Islamiyya, leading to the Movement of the Islamic Trend (MTI) (Enhaili & Adda, 2003).

In the 1970s Tunisian societies witnessed a popular Islamic revival and subsequently developed a noticeably political nature (Boulby, 1988, pp. 590-614). In education and cultural cycles, Political Islam became a factor aimed at changing the status quo. Islamism spread out and became instrumental in government sectors, social groups, and security organisations.

Political Islamism was allowed by both the West and the Arab world in Tunisia as a necessary means for a democratic government to progress significantly. In the opinion of John Turner (as cited in Sarah R Loudon) Islamist parties comfortably participated in Tunisian politics as not only a “cure but rather a beginning to a possibility” of democratic growth and sustainability (Louden, 2015, p. 2).



According to Willis, Michael J, in the Maghreb, the impacts of Islamism in development is comparable to none. In Tunisia for instance, Political Islam has characterised the prime opposition force, it forms the most momentous political challenge Tunisians dealt with during the post-colonialism (Willis, 2014, pp. 155-203). Islamists “advocate violence to produce change by force in a society”, this threat of violence is “heavy and very dangerous” and goes along with unparalleled social tension which does not affect the livelihood of the Tunisians (Blibech, Driss, & Longo, 2014). Islamism in Tunisia was felt throughout the dominating regimes and the developmental sphere, it provided the foundation for ‘political authority and legitimacy’ and was welcomed as a counterbalance to the “radical left” opposition (Willis, 2014, p. 156).

Layachi Azzedine stated that in Tunisia, Islamism became perceptible during the days of deep economic and political crisis, with demonstrations peaking at the 1984 riot (Layachi & Haireche, 1992). In the 1970s, Bourguiba's economic and political policies increasingly faced vocal opposition from Islamism, and in effect revealed a growing impatience with the rigid authoritarianism (Boulby, 1988). Habib Bourguiba was “consumed by Islamist threat to his Western-inspired modernization processes” at the close of his regime (Layachi & Haireche, 1992, p. 85). As a result of post-independence, the Bourguiba regime used Islamism to ‘justify and legitimise’ their policies (Willis, 2014).

Azzedine further stated that, in Tunisia, Islamist party Ennahda became more radicalised and threatened Tunisia’s democracy, stability and its chances of economic recovery, due to Ben Ali’s failure to legalise their party (Layachi & Haireche, 1992). In the early 1980s, Rached Ghannouchi a founder of Ennahda preached rejection of Tunisia’s secularism for Islamic and Arab traditions. Rachid Ghannouchi an advocate of Islam as a law was reportedly stated that “political Islam” no longer had a place in the Middle East. Maajid Nawaz cited Ghannouchi as saying:

“We want the religious activity to be completely independent of political activity,” “This is good for politicians because they would no longer be accused of manipulating religion for political means and good for religion because it would not be held hostage to politics... We are leaving political Islam and entering democratic Islam. We are Muslim Democrats who no longer claim to represent political Islam” (Nawaz, 2016, p. 1).

In summary, as clearly stated above, Islamism prior to the uprisings was very instrumental in the settings of Tunisia and for that matter in the Arab world. Political Islam has been used as an opposing tool against the repressive government for long throughout history before the Jasmine Revolution or the Arab Spring.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONTENTS ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE

2.5. Theoretical Framework

Just as international relations theories try to explain every event through its lenses, this paper would look at the Arab spring through the lenses of social constructivism. Although realism is a dominant theory in IR discipline, one would not comprehend and appreciate the significance of societal norms, rules, identities and other social dimensions in the settings of Arab World should the revolutions that swept through the Arab World be assessed via realism. Also, realist thinkers have less to say since egoistic nature and state policies did not take the better part of the revolution, particularly in Tunisia’s case. Lots of theories have failed to elucidate and to foresee events in the international arena which involves the Arab Spring; due to the reason that they presume that states have a certain degree of generality.

Social Constructivism, an International Relation theory, dwells on the idea that relations between states are socially constructed. According to Social Constructivists, human nature is the core fabric on which international relations are grounded, but these relations ‘take specific historical, cultural, and political forms that are a product of human interaction in a social world (Fierke, 2007). Constructivism brings (back) ideas, culture, and domestic politics to the IR scope. These are all essential aspects of shaping a



state's identity, and 'identity politics at home constrain and enable state identity, interests, and actions overseas. Social forces such as ideas, norms, and rules influence states' identities and interests are highly appreciated in the study of the international system. Nicholas Onuf postulated that the global politics is "a world of our making"; there is a process of interaction between agency and structure and the international system is instituted by ideas, not material forces (Onuf, 1989).

Using the Tunisians' Arab Spring as a case study in the study, it will be contended that social constructivism can effectively explain events in the international system because of its ontological position that accentuates that "structures not only constraint; they also constitute the identity of actors" (Fierke, 2007, p. 181). Social constructivism sees the revolution that erupted in Tunisia as the proliferation of democratic norms, chiefly brought through the media technologies and social networks interactions led the youth in the Middle East to become the main agent and force of change and transformation during the Arab Spring (Hartmann, 2013). Social networks and interactions are believed to be the impelling cause in the happening of the revolution as this level of interaction instituted discrepancies. In the opinion of constructivists, the Arab Spring would not have occurred without social interaction, as these exchanges both on the domestic and international level mutually generated conflicts (Hartmann, 2013).

Ideas, human freedom and human rights, dignity and social equity inundated the Middle East and deteriorated the structure that had been in existence for ages. Albeit structure noticeably sets parameters in a political system, these parameters are reversible. Certainly, it might be because many leaders in the Arab world presumed that their set parameters were irreversible, and also do believe in the resilience of their political authoritarianism.....because they felt that their identity and structure is secured and that the increased influx of ideas and Western norms via globalisation could not be a threat...but, the agents of political socialisation were expert in influencing the people's consciousness, particularly through media"(El-Mahdi, 2012). The more frequent the social interactions became, the more the people were ready to reconstruct their social identities. As Toby Dodge stated: "the demands for full citizenship, for the recognition of individual political rights, were a powerful unifying theme across the Arab revolutions" (Dodge, 2012, p. 64).

The Arab Spring revolution was positioned on the idea of individual and political rights. The need and awareness for the recognition of human rights and freedom in civil societies—which are up made of engagement and social exchange—was a paramount tool for social structural transformation which led the people of the Middle East to shift from the prevailing structures to construct new ways or structures. Also, Arab Spring revolution was far from gaining grounds in the Western sense of freedom, but, was due to a culturally accepted form of control and governance. These, therefore, make social constructivism a reasonable theory to explain the Arab Spring and some events in the current international system.

3. CONTENTS ANALYSIS OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE AND CONCLUSION

Various scholars, researchers, and other institutions have attributed economic, political and social related issues as the main contributory factors behind the Arab spring without given attention to Islamism or Islamist movement which was deeply rooted in their settings since the 1970s. As stated in Section 1, this paper attempts to be very different from the "attributed" reasons by analysing the works of the scholars from the Middle East and beyond and draw a logical conclusion to that it effects.

To start with the work of Katerina Dalacoura. She worked on "The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications" and argued that none of the 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East was led by Islamist movements or had a predominantly Islamist agenda. Dalacoura also admitted that despite the limited role of Islamism in the uprisings, Islamist movements will politically benefit from the various revolutions. She argued further that "It is difficult to establish unifying causal factors behind such disparate events"—the reasons for and the mechanisms of popular mobilisation is insufficient; the manner of regime response was equally important in explaining outcomes" (Dalacoura, 2012, p. 79). Dalacoura again stated that before 2011 there was apolitical



religiosity throughout the Middle East, but the prevailing effective structures of the organised Islamist groups enabled them to capitalise on more open political processes (Dalacoura, 2012). Louden Sarah working on "Political Islamism in Tunisia: A History of Repression and a Complex Forum for Potential Change" contended that, though political Islamist was not the force behind the demonstrations, however, Islamist movement Ennahda, benefited from the revolution by getting lots of followers after the removal of Ben Ali (Louden, 2015).

According to Ozekin and Akkas combination of factors such as high unemployment, rising social inequalities, rampant government corruption, clientelism, the assault on human dignity, the denial of basic rights by regimes, the lack of liberal values, the change of demographic profiles in the last few decades and a further deterioration of economies due to the global financial crisis and food price increases, coupled with catalytic factors such as the self-immolation of Mohammed Bouazizi (Ozekin & Akkas, 2014). A mix of factors can be reduced to economic deterioration and government corruption combined with the suppressive and violent nature of the Arab regimes and the suppression of individual rights and freedoms (Salih, 2013).

Furthermore, Olivier Roy argued that the demonstrators sought for dignity, elections, democracy, good governance, and human rights, however, the demonstrators did not take power—indeed, they did not even try—instead, they only wanted to establish a new political scene, rather it the Islamist party known as Ennahda, with its deep roots in society, enjoying a legitimacy conferred by decades of political opposition, and defending conservative and religious values shared by most of the populace were able to attract votes as a result of their credibility as party of government (Roy, 2012).

For decades, throughout most of the Muslim world, particularly in Arab countries, Islamism has become a powerful force, with a profound conviction that the Islamic community is stalled in a state of cruelty. Sheri Berman put it :

Islamists seek not merely stricter religious observance or a change in political leadership but a revolutionary transformation of their societies.....Since the rise of Islamism has had and will probably continue to have profound social, political, and strategic consequences, understanding its emergence and development is of the utmost practical and intellectual importance (Berman, 2003, p. 257).

Taking a critical look at the works above, one could logically conclude that the underlying factors behind Arab spring have been understudied since these scholars sought to relegate the influence of Islamism or Political Islam in addressing the factors behind the uprisings. How could Islamist party benefits if indeed they didn't take a major role in or were not in the process?

Olivier Roy, Louden Sarah R, Katerina Dalacoura, and among other scholars argued that though Islamism or Islamists Party Ennahda was not involved in the uprising yet it benefited greatly from the outcome. This paper totally disagrees with these assertions. The reason is that since, the 1980s Islamism has been used as a tool against the ruling government and has led so many revolutions against regimes, therefore, without reference to Islamism as a major or minor factor behind the uprisings will be misleading if not academically disastrous. According to Sheri Berman, Islamist programs and their engagements helped their movement to pulled a general support while sabotaging the state's legitimacy (Berman, 2003). Sinkaya Bayram, also argued that Islamist movements with its history of opposition to the oppressive regimes gave their backing to the revolutionary social movements (Sinkaya, 2015). Tunisia, informed by the tragic experience of the Algerian civil war—also fought along Islamist–secular lines—gravitated in a similar direction in the 1980s and early 1990s. It was then that En-Nahda, formerly the Movement of the Islamic Tendency (MTI), emerged as the main challenger to Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's staunch secularist rule (Shahin, 1997).

Layachi and Haireche, also stated that, in Tunisia, Islamist party En-Eahda became more radicalised and threatened Tunisia's democracy, stability and its chances of economic recovery, due to Ben Ali's failure to legalise their party (Layachi & Haireche, 1992). Islamist parties like El Nahda in Tunisia, engineering for the fall of the regimes, gave enormous momentum to the revolutionary movements. Mosques were



used effectively in the mobilisation of the masses against ruling regimes. Mottos or slogans chanted by crowds at rallies and the demands of the people, according to the Iranian officials, were “more religious than political (Keshavarz, 2012).

To sum it up, the series of uprisings that engulfed the Arab countries, and in some cases led regimes down, had Islamism agenda or Islamists movements behind it. Other factors such as economic, social and political were symptoms of profound weakened political structure across the Arab countries for ages. For us to better understand the forces behind Arab spring, it is only academically appropriate to take into consideration the holistic view of deep-rooted events prior to the Arab spring without prejudice. There are lots of countries in both underdeveloped and advanced countries with similar or even worse economic, social and political demands or problems yet they are able to withstand so what makes that of Tunisia and other countries that witnessed the Arab spring different if not Islamism or political Islam? The research, therefore, calls on future researchers to critically look into the underlying factors leading to Arab Spring using quantitative methods with open-ended questions and with special attention on Political Islam.

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