The Promise of the Arab Spring

In Political Development, No Gain Without Pain

Sheri Berman

Two years after the outbreak of what has come to be known as the Arab Spring, the bloom is off the rose. Fledgling democracies in North Africa are struggling to move forward or even maintain control, government crackdowns in the Persian Gulf and elsewhere have kept liberalization at bay, and Syria is slipping ever deeper into a vicious civil war that threatens to ignite the Middle East. Instead of widespread elation about democracy finally coming to the region, one now hears pessimism about the many obstacles in the way, fear about what will happen next, and even open nostalgia for the old authoritarian order. Last June, when the Egyptian military dismissed parliament and tried to turn back the clock by gutting the civilian presidency, The Wall Street Journal’s chief foreign policy columnist cracked, “Let’s hope it works.” (It didn’t.) And Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi’s attempted power grab in November made such nostalgia commonplace.

The skepticism is as predictable as it is misguided. Every surge of democratization over the last century—after World War I, after World War II, during the so-called third wave in recent decades—has been followed by an undertow, accompanied by widespread questioning of the viability and even desirability of democratic governance in the areas in question. As soon as political progress stalls, a conservative reaction sets in as critics lament the turbulence of the new era and look back wistfully to the supposed stability and security of its authoritarian

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predecessor. One would have hoped that by now people would know better—that they would understand that this is what political development actually looks like, what it has always looked like, in the West just as much as in the Middle East, and that the only way ahead is to plunge forward rather than turn back.

The first error critics make is treating new democracies as blank slates, ignoring how much of their dynamics and fate are inherited rather than chosen. Turmoil, violence, and corruption are taken as evidence of the inherent dysfunctionality of democracy itself, or of the immaturity or irrationality of a particular population, rather than as a sign of the previous dictatorship's pathologies. Because authoritarian regimes lack popular legitimacy, they often manipulate and deepen communal cleavages in order to divide potential opponents and generate support among favored groups. So when democratization occurs, the pent-up distrust and animosity often explode. And because authoritarian regimes rule by command rather than consensus, they suppress dissent and block the creation of political and social institutions that allow for the regular, peaceful articulation and organization of popular demands. So citizens in new democracies often express their grievances in a volatile and disorganized way, through a dizzying array of parties, extremist rhetoric and behavior, and street protests and even battles.

All these dynamics have been present in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. In Egypt, for example, the regimes of Anwar al-Sadat and Hosni Mubarak refused to allow the development of real political parties or many independent civil-society associations, which helps explain why Islamism is such a dominant political force there now. Religious organizations were among the only forums in which average citizens could express themselves or participate actively in the lives of their communities, and so when Mubarak fell and the transition occurred, only Islamists had the infrastructure in place to mobilize supporters effectively. The underdevelopment of other civil-society and political organizations, in turn, meant that once the dictatorship disintegrated, there were few institutions capable of channeling, much less responding to, popular grievances—which explains the current lack of strong non-Islamist political parties and the tendency of Egyptians to take to the streets to express their demands and dissatisfaction. Morsi's November move to escape judicial review of his edicts reflects a broader Islamist distrust of Egyptian courts, due in part to the absence of reliable rule of law during the Mubarak era, just as the inability of the anti-Mubarak
forces to work together today reflects their fractured, poisoned history under the previous tyranny. As Ahmed Mekky, the justice minister, said of the judicial-review controversy, “I blame all of Egypt, because they do not know how to talk to each other”—which was precisely Mubarak’s goal.

Similar stories could be told of other Middle Eastern dictatorships. In Iraq, Saddam Hussein deliberately pitted different sectors of his population directly against one another as a way to tie certain groups to the regime and weaken any potential opposition. This practice, along with the regime’s complete suppression of normal political or civil-society activity, meant that Iraq was only steps away from slipping into violent chaos once his regime was toppled—a process the United States facilitated by failing to help provide an effective new order to replace the old one. In Libya, Muammar al-Qaddafi ruled through a bizarre personalized dictatorship that left his country almost entirely stateless after his ouster, paving the way for the struggle of the new government in Tripoli to establish order throughout its domain. And in Syria, the Assad family’s dictatorship has favored the country’s Alawite minority at the expense of other communities, setting the stage for communal strife as the Assads’ rule disintegrates.

In addition to blaming new democratic regimes for the sins of their authoritarian predecessors, critics also set absurdly high benchmarks for success, ones that lack any historical perspective. They interpret post-transition violence, corruption, confusion, and incompetence as signs that particular countries (or even entire regions or religions) are not ready for democracy, as if normal democratic transitions lead smoothly and directly to stable liberal outcomes and countries that stumble along the way must have something wrong with them. In fact, stable liberal democracy usually emerges only at the end of long, often violent struggles, with many twists, turns, false starts, and detours.

These troubles, moreover, are not a bug but a feature—not signs of problems with democracy but evidence of the difficult, messy process of political development through which societies purge themselves of the vestiges of dictatorship and construct new and better democratic orders. Stable liberal democracy requires more than just a shift in
political forms; it also involves eliminating the antidemocratic social, cultural, and economic legacies of the old regime. Such a process takes lots of time and effort, over multiple tries. Historically, most initial transitions have been the beginning of the democratization process, not the end of it—something that the tortured histories of today’s mature liberal democracies make clear.

FRENCH LESSONS
Take France. Just as the Arab Spring and other recent waves of global democratization were greeted with jubilation by observers around the globe, so, too, was the collapse of France’s hereditary dictatorship in 1789. In The Prelude, William Wordsworth remembered the time as one when Europe “was thrilled with joy, / France standing on the top of golden hours, / And human nature seeming born again.” Yet despite the initial optimism, the transition soon went awry. In 1791, with the proclamation of a constitutional monarchy, France made its first attempt to create a new political order, but this moderate political regime was rejected by both reactionaries and radicals. The latter soon gained the upper hand, and in 1793, they executed the king and declared a republic with universal suffrage and a commitment to a broad range of civil and political rights. Then, Europe’s first modern democracy descended quickly into what came to be called the Reign of Terror, in which 20,000–40,000 people were executed for “counterrevolutionary” activities.

The British political theorist Edmund Burke was only the most well known of the conservative critics who argued that these experiences showed the dangers of radical political change and the need for elites and institutions to restrain mass passions. But Burke and the other critics were wrong. The conflict, chaos, and violence that followed the French Revolution were not the inexorable result of either democracy per se or the immaturity of the French masses; rather, they stemmed from the way the previous dictatorship had ruled. The ancien régime in France had rested on an alliance between the king and a narrow slice of society, primarily the nobility. In order to keep the aristocrats’ support, French kings bought them off with various financial benefits and privileges, including pensions, patronage, special legal treatment, access to lucrative commercial opportunities, and exemption from taxation. This system allowed the Bourbons to stabilize the country and begin building a modern, centralized state. But it also created the widespread popular perception
that French nobles were parasites who extracted resources from the state while exploiting the peasantry.

The ancien régime, in short, rested on an extremely narrow social base, with the king and the nobility locked in an unhealthy embrace that created resentment and conflict between the lower orders and the privileged sectors of society. As the scholar Hilton Root has noted, this led to a “society divided into closed, self-regarding groups”—and the members of these groups, as Alexis de Tocqueville quotes one of Louis XVI’s own ministers as saying, had “so few links between themselves that everyone thinks solely of his own interests, no trace of any feeling for the public weal is anywhere to be found.”

By the second half of the eighteenth century, thanks largely to several expensive and disastrous wars, the French state was in grave fiscal trouble. Unwilling to raise taxes on the favored rich, the regime resorted to borrowing more and more, and by the 1780s, its debt burden had become unsustainable. When the king was finally forced to call a national assembly in 1789 to try to deal with the country’s problems, the long-simmering conflicts within and among different socio-economic groups burst into the open, and France was set on the path to both revolution and postrevolutionary turmoil.

If France’s first democratic experiment failed, it nevertheless made a profound contribution to the eventual formation of a stable liberal democracy. Economically, the revolution replaced a patronage system based on pseudo-feudal hierarchies with a market system based on private property and equality before the law. Socially, it replaced a society structured by functionally different hereditary groups (nobles, peasants, and so forth) with a nation composed of equal citizens. Politically, it changed popular attitudes to citizenship, rights, and legitimate governance. And it dramatically accelerated the state’s modernization, replacing a welter of local arrangements and fiefdoms with a national bureaucracy and national taxation system. The revolution and its aftermath, in short, turned out to be the crucial first steps in a century-and-a-half-long struggle to get rid of the ancien régime and put something better and more democratic in its place.
THE ITALIAN JOB
Italy, meanwhile, democratized just before World War I. The new regime was plagued by social conflict and political instability from the start, and the problems were exacerbated by the war’s difficult aftermath. In 1919–20, about 1.3 million urban and industrial workers marched off the job and declared that they, rather than the owners and managers, were now in charge of the factories. The situation in rural areas was perhaps even more chaotic, as peasants and agricultural workers seized unoccupied or underutilized property and large landowners responded by hiring private militias to keep the rebellious lower orders in check. The country’s two largest political parties, representing Catholics and Socialists, respectively, were unable or unwilling either to work together or to commit unequivocally to democracy, making it impossible to build stable, effective governments. Many Italians quickly grew fed up with the constant conflict and political instability and blamed democracy itself for the country’s problems. And in October 1922, the antidemocrats got what they wanted when the Italian king, urged on by conservatives, terminated the democratic experiment and turned the country over to the dynamic leader of the radical right, Benito Mussolini.

The shift to fascism was applauded by many both within Italy and without who believed that dictatorship offered a better chance of providing the stability and development that the country so desperately needed. And Mussolini’s first years in office only increased his celebrity and acclaim. But the adulation was misplaced. The short-lived democratic regime had been more attractive than its fascist successor; its problems, moreover, were caused mostly by its own nondemocratic predecessor, which had deliberately divided and manipulated the Italian public and refused to allow the routine expression of popular demands and discontent.

Only a few decades earlier, the Italian peninsula had been home to a large number of separate states with different political, economic, social, and cultural histories. Poor transportation networks and the lack of a common language meant that most inhabitants of the region knew and cared little about one another. And when unification did occur, in the 1860s, it was the result not of a mass popular uprising but of decisions from above, made by the leaders of Piedmont, the peninsula’s most powerful state. The Piedmontese imposed what was essentially a foreign political system (their own) on the rest of the
area, and as a result, the new Italian state met immediate resistance—from communities that felt colonized and exploited by Piedmont and from the Catholic Church, which rejected the idea of a superior secular authority governing the lives of Italians.

Lacking the ability and perhaps the desire to cultivate the support of the masses, Italian political elites ruled the new country through a system that came to be known as trasformismo, which involved co-opting certain favored groups into the political order via the spoils system. The master of this method was Giovanni Giolitti, Italy's prime minister at various points between 1892 and 1921, who used the extension and withholding of state patronage and backroom deals to reward or punish key constituencies. Institutionalized corruption, in other words, was embedded in the heart of the young Italian state from early on, something that had profound consequences for the country's subsequent political development.

Since the formal institutions of Italian politics during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—elections and parliament—were clearly not the true arbiter of political power in the country, many groups in Italian society lost interest in them and began organizing outside or even against them. The arbitrary exclusion of certain groups from power, moreover, generated resentment and frustration. And because the political system was not responsive to popular concerns and demands, the divisions within Italian society were not dealt with either consistently or effectively.
All this meant that when a full transition to democracy finally occurred, the new regime started life with a vast array of problems. The chaos, conflict, and violence that plagued Italy in the years before Mussolini came to power, in other words, were caused not by too much democracy then (as critics claimed) but by too little earlier. The country’s fascist interlude was a step back rather than a step forward, and when Italian democracy was restored after World War II, it was able to benefit from its trial run and pick up where the earlier democratic experiment had left off.

MODEL GERMANY

Germany democratized in the democratic wave that swept across Europe after World War I, and the young Weimar Republic was also burdened from birth by social conflict, political instability, and extremism. Within months of the republic’s founding, local Communists declared a Soviet republic in Bavaria, which was soon overthrown by the Freikorps, right-wing militias largely beyond the central government’s control. The Freikorps then continued their rampages, engaging in assassinations and violent demonstrations and eventually supporting an attempted coup in 1920; other right-wing uprisings, including Hitler’s infamous 1923 Beer Hall Putsch, followed, as did left-wing rebellions. And to top it off, the government’s default on reparations debts in 1923 caused the Belgians and the French to seize control of the Ruhr, setting off the Great Inflation—which ended up destroying the German middle classes and further delegitimizing the government and other mainstream political institutions.

Some stabilization did occur in the late 1920s, but the republic barely had time to breathe before it was buffeted by the Great Depression. When mainstream political forces dithered in the face of looming economic and political catastrophe, extremists gained ground, and in the fall of 1932, the Nazis became the largest party in the country, having run on a platform marrying attacks on democracy with promises to tackle capitalism’s problems and heal the country’s social divisions. In January 1933, Hitler was offered the chancellorship, and Germany’s democratic experiment came to an end.

Echoing the fears and analyses of Burke and others, hordes of conservative critics claimed that Weimar and other failed interwar democratic experiments showed that democracy and mass political participation more generally were disasters waiting to happen. Only authoritarian
political systems ruled by a strong leader, they claimed, could ensure order and discipline and head off social strife, political instability, and moral permissiveness. Once again, however, the critics were wrong. Weimar’s fate had less to do with any inherent problems of democracy or what the Spanish writer José Ortega y Gasset called “mass man” than it did with the tragic legacy of previous German authoritarianism.

Modern Germany emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century unified from above under the auspices of its most powerful state, the conservative and militaristic Prussia. The government was run by a chancellor who reported to a hereditary monarch, the kaiser, rather than to the public at large, and there were two legislative houses, an upper one dominated by Prussian conservatives and a lower one elected by universal suffrage. The chancellor did not require mass support to stay in power, but he did require it to pass major legislation. This soft authoritarian or mixed regime created strong incentives for rulers to manipulate politics in order to gain what they wanted while keeping opponents off balance and on the defensive. Otto von Bismarck, who served as chancellor for nearly two decades, was a master of this balancing act, holding together a conservative, antidemocratic coalition of the large landowning Junker aristocracy and heavy industrialists while dividing, suppressing, and demonizing his Catholic and Socialist opponents and deepening divisions across the country. Bismarck’s “enemies of the state” policy also exerted a pernicious influence on German nationalism, helping cement the idea that Germany faced dangers within as well as without.

The result was a Germany unified politically but increasingly divided against itself socially, with a warped sense of nationalism, a paranoia about internal as well as external enemies, and rising levels of frustration and extremism (since the nondemocratic government proved unable or unwilling to respond to public needs and demands). When a full transition to democracy finally occurred in the wake of Germany’s defeat in 1918, therefore, the new regime inherited many crippling legacies from its predecessor, including deliberately falsified blame for the loss of the war and all the political, economic, and psychological consequences that flowed from it.
In Germany, as in France and Italy, even though the country’s initial democratization experiment failed spectacularly, it had major positive effects down the road. When a second chance at democracy came a generation later, there was much to build on, and everything from political parties to national and local governments to civil-society organizations were reclaimed from the ashes. The Weimar experience helped political elites later on ensure that past mistakes were not repeated, with the lessons influencing the writing of constitutions, the structuring of welfare states and employer-employee relations, and political behavior overall. The interwar period and its aftermath proved to be not a detour but an important stage of Europe’s long-term struggle to build stable liberal democracies.

IT GETS BETTER
What do such cases have to say about the Arab Spring? That the problems so evident in Egypt and other transitioning countries today are entirely normal and predictable, that they are primarily the fault of the old authoritarian regimes rather than new democratic actors, and that the demise of authoritarianism and the experimentation with democratic rule will almost certainly be seen in retrospect as major steps forward in these countries’ political development, even if things get worse before they eventually get better.

Most countries that are stable liberal democracies today had a very difficult time getting there. Even the cases most often held up as exemplars of early or easy democratization, such as England and the United States, encountered far more problems than are remembered, with full-scale civil wars along the way. Just as those troubles did not mean democracy was wrong or impossible for North America or western Europe, so the troubles of today’s fledgling Arab democracies do not mean it is wrong or impossible for the Middle East.

Then and now, most of the problems new democracies faced were inherited. Democracy does not necessarily cause or exacerbate communal and social strife and frustration, but it does allow the distrust and bitterness built up under authoritarian regimes to surface, often with lamentable results. But nostalgia for authoritarian stability is precisely the wrong response to such troubles, since it is the pathologies inherent in authoritarianism that help cause the underlying problems in the first place.
History tells us that societies cannot overcome their problems unless and until they face them squarely. The toppling of a long-standing authoritarian regime is not the end of a process of democratization but the beginning of it. Even failed democratic experiments are usually critical positive stages in the political development of countries, eras in which they get started on rooting out the antidemocratic social, cultural, and economic legacies of the past. Too many observers today interpret problems and setbacks as signs that an eventual stable democratic outcome is not in the cards. But such violent and tragic events as the French Revolution, the collapse of interwar Italian and German democracy, and the American Civil War were not evidence that the countries in question could not create or sustain liberal democracies; they were crucial parts of the process by which those countries achieved just such an outcome.

The widespread pessimism about the fate of the Arab Spring is almost certainly misplaced. Of course, the Middle East has a unique mix of cultural, historical, and economic attributes. But so does every region, and there is little reason to expect the Arab world to be a permanent exception to the rules of political development. The year 2011 was the dawn of a promising new era for the region, and it will be looked on down the road as a historical watershed, even though the rapids downstream will be turbulent. Conservative critics of democracy will be wrong this time, just as they were about France, Italy, Germany, and every other country that supposedly was better off under tyranny.