



Dec-2012

# Will the Arab Spring Succeed in Bringing Bread, Freedom, and Dignity?

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## Recommended Citation

Popiden, Sandra (2012). Will the Arab Spring Succeed in Bringing Bread, Freedom, and Dignity?. *Bridgewater Review*, 31(2), 22-24.  
Available at: [http://vc.bridgew.edu/br\\_rev/vol31/iss2/9](http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol31/iss2/9)

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# Will the Arab Spring Succeed in Bringing Bread, Freedom, and Dignity?

*Sandra Popiden*

*Tunisia has a good chance to become a democratic, peaceful, and stable state, and a good example for the whole region. However, this development will be at risk, if the government does not meet the population's high expectations to find a quick solution for the social problems... The most important task is to find a solution to the socio-economic problems... [The people] want jobs, houses and a better future. And all of them demand to change everything at once.*

Tunisian Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali, 2012.

**E**conomic discontent fueled the political dissatisfaction that erupted in the Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen in 2011. Demonstrators blamed repressive authoritarian governments for slow economic growth, increasing poverty and social inequality, high youth unemployment and rampant corruption. Alongside demands for increased political freedom, greater participation in politics, and an end to repression were calls for economic freedom and improved well-being. The uprisings, which spawned democracy in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, continue to reverberate across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) by opening up previously closed public spaces to wider popular participation in national debates over the prospects for democracy in Arab countries. Crucial to these

prospects is tangible economic progress.

The most urgent challenge that the newly elected leaders face, therefore, is the formulation of policies that will foster economic growth and improve living standards. As the experience of new democracies across the world over the past thirty years shows, tangible economic progress improves the likelihood of successful democratic transitions and endows otherwise fragile young democracies with legitimacy and popular support essential for their survival.

## **What do the Protesters Want?**

In the five years prior to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, Arab Barometer surveys found widespread agreement among the Arab public that the most important problems in the region related to the economy, corruption and authoritarianism (<http://www.arab-barometer.org/>). The surveys revealed vividly that the Arab public views its declining economic well-being and the continued authoritarian rule in their

countries as inextricably linked. It is, therefore, not surprising that the people who spearheaded the Arab Spring uprisings demanded the replacement of ossified and unresponsive authoritarian regimes with transparent and accountable democratic governments as the means to deal with their own deteriorating well-being.

The food shortages and price shocks experienced since 2008, such as the 32% increase in food prices between 2010 and 2011, have continued even after the uprisings. Arab countries' high dependence on food imports and declining remittances due to the global recession have only amplified these price shocks. For example, in a Gallup poll conducted in the spring of 2011, nearly half the survey respondents in Egypt expressed difficulty in meeting their needs. Their number one concern was price inflation, especially the cost of food, oil and sugar. Moreover, in a clear reflection of the decline in economic well-being, 53% of Egyptian respondents said that economic conditions in their cities are worsening, a figure twice as high as it was in the previous year (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/148133/egypt-tahrir-transition.aspx>).

The economic crisis is likely to be most politically destabilizing in Yemen, the least-developed Arab country. According to World Food Program spokesperson, Emilia Casella, fuel prices on the black market have risen 500% since January 2011. Prices of staple foods such as bread, flour, sugar and milk have also increased by 40–60%. The food crisis in Yemen (as one report in the 14 March 2012 *Guardian* noted) has resulted in five million people (22% of the population) requiring emergency food aid; another five million are experiencing moderate food insecurity. Clearly, people in MENA countries in transition are still waiting for the economic improvements they hoped their political revolutions would bring.

## Making the Political and Socio-Economic Systems Work for Young People

One of the most pressing challenges in MENA stems from the fact that Arab youth (15–24 years) comprise 20% of the region's total population, but 30% of its working-age population. More critically, however, 25% of the Arab youth are unemployed, which is not only the highest rate of unemployment in the world but more than twice as high as the 11% unemployment rate across MENA (see Table 1). This youth bulge has serious economic and political implications for Arab

countries generally, and for the emergence and survival of new and fragile democracies specifically.

The World Bank estimates that the costs of youth unemployment to the region amount to \$50 billion annually. Unemployment rates of 30–40 % are most commonly found among females and the university educated. The key to the region's economic success is incorporating the roughly 80 million young people into the labor force. This will restore the path to social mobility that has been blocked and aid in long-term projects such as improving health and education outcomes. Bolstering

private-sector opportunities is essential to relieving the pressure on the overburdened public sector and countering the brain-drain emigration trends found among the most educated.

An imperative in Arab countries, therefore, is to engage this *generation-in-waiting* as productive members of society. Sound policymaking and skillful management of the economy are essential to such efforts. Reforms are needed to train the youth and give them the marketable skills that private employers require. Labor markets and banking institutions also need to be reformed so that small business

**Table 1 – The Youth Bulge and Its Economic Implications in MENA**

Countries	Youth as % of Total Population	Youth as % of Working Age Population	Youth Unemployment Rate (%)	Total Unemployment Rate (%)
Algeria	23.00	34.00	45.60	10.00
Bahrain	15.00	22.00	20.70	5.00
Egypt	21.00	34.00	25.80	8.00
Iraq	20.00	36.00	45.30	30.00
Jordan	20.00	33.00	38.90	11.00
Kuwait	15.00	21.00	23.30	3.00
Lebanon	18.00	29.00	21.30	12.00
Libya	23.00	34.00	27.30	7.00
Morocco	18.00	32.00	15.70	10.00
Oman	21.00	33.00	19.60	7.00
Qatar	14.00	18.00	17.00	1.00
Saudi Arabia	19.00	31.00	15.90	5.00
Syria	23.00	38.00	19.80	21.00
Tunisia	21.00	31.00	26.50	14.00
UAE	17.00	23.00	6.30	2.00
Yemen	21.00	42.00	33.10	25.00
West Bank/Gaza	19.00	38.00	25.13	10.69
Mean	19.57	31.12	25.13	10.69

Source: Ragui Assaad and Farzaneh Roudi-Fahimi, "Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge?" (Washington, DC: Population Reference Bureau, 2007) 3; Jad Chaaban, "Job Creation in the Arab Economies: Navigating Through Difficult Waters" *Arab Human Development Research Paper Series* (New York: UNDP Regional Bureau of Arab States, 2010) 21.

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and potential entrepreneurs can have flexibility in hiring and much-needed access to physical capital. The hesitation of new leaders to tackle the economic aspects of transition is a risky do-nothing strategy. The continued presence of large numbers of educated, unemployed and discontented youth does not bode well for the region's long-term political stability.

## Economic Transformation is Crucial to Designing a New Order

In order to generate the stabilizing effects of economic growth, employment and development, the pioneers of democracy in Arab countries face

entrenched interests in the economy, which is estimated to be about 30%. The outcome of this political standoff will affect the ability of the moderate Islamist Freedom and Justice Party to implement its pro-business and anti-corruption platform as well as its social policies targeting Egypt's poverty and inequality problems.

Similarly, Tunisia, which was viewed by many as the economic miracle of the Arab world, also faces problems in overcoming the entrenched obstacles to reform. A key challenge for the coalition government led by the moderate Islamist party, *Ennahda*, is to divest "the family" or "godfathers of Tunis" who seek to protect their interests in the

the democratic goals of the revolution, widespread economic growth and development are required.

For MENA countries in transition, two immediate challenges are to restore investor confidence and create a climate that will allow for the revival of industries, such as tourism. Over the long term, governments also face difficulties in eradicating corruption and promoting pro-market economic policies with strong welfare components. Although it has been a politically appealing choice in the region to expand populist subsidies, this is ultimately not an economically viable long-term solution. In order for the Arab Spring to be considered a success, youth must be integrated into the political and socio-economic systems. This can only be accomplished if the countries in transition participate more fully in the global economy. Globalized countries grow more quickly than do those with closed economies. Thus, policies that facilitate international trade and investment, such as reducing protectionism, creating special economic zones, cutting customs costs and diversifying exports, are likely to measurably increase economic growth and development.

Beyond diplomatic statements, western countries can signal their support for the democratization movements by working toward establishing free trade agreements and economic partnerships. At this pivotal moment in history, a progressive partnership between Arab and western countries based on creative leadership is required to fulfill the aspirations of the Arab Spring.

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two interrelated problems. The first is how to guard against potential coups and counter-revolutions and the second is how to reduce the power of those who oppose job-creating economic reforms. Egypt, the most populous country in the Arab world, has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment. It is the second-largest Arab economy, but 40% of its population makes a living with less than \$2 a day. President Mohamed Morsi faces two politically sensitive tasks: getting the military to return to the barracks; and separating them from their commanding position over the economy. This is likely to be a difficult power struggle, as the military has dominated politics for decades. Complicating this transition is the level of the military's deeply

economy. In one Wikileaks document, a confidential assessment by the United States Ambassador to Tunisia asserted that half of all commercial elites in the country were related to the Ben Ali family. Dissolving these patronage networks is fundamental to achieving good governance and establishing new partnerships with independent entrepreneurs. Such actions would also signal to investors that the government is committed to creating competitive and transparent business conditions. Ultimately, these efforts are crucial to revitalizing the economy and improving the well-being of the population. To date, Tunisia has shown the most promise in achieving both political and economic transformations. Toppling the dictator was only the beginning. In order to stabilize country and safeguard