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Introduction: Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

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Abstract

The wave of revolutions and popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the dawn of 2011 highlights the inescapable relevance and impact of human rights on the region's politics and security. The Arab regimes' violations of human rights and lack of respect to the human dignity of their citizens are in fact the seeds of the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, the rebellion of the Egyptian people against Mubarak regime, as well as the ongoing uprisings across the rest of MENA. The women and men who are protesting in the streets of Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Algeria are not driven by international concerns such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the relations between Islam and the West, or the United States policy in the region; instead, they are driven by domestic concerns, particularly unemployment, poverty, inequality, political oppression and corruption. They are protesting against the violations of their human rights by the domestic regimes, demanding a new social contract based on human rights rather than oppression; human security rather than fear; and human dignity rather than humiliation.

Keywords

Human rights, Middle East, North Africa, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, Economic rights, Social rights, Civil rights, Political rights

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Introduction: Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)

By Raslan Ibrahim

The wave of revolutions and popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) at the dawn of 2011 highlights the inescapable relevance and impact of human rights on the region's politics and security. The Arab regimes' violations of human rights and lack of respect to the human dignity of their citizens are in fact the seeds of the Jasmine revolution in Tunisia, the rebellion of the Egyptian people against Mubarak regime, as well as the ongoing uprisings across the rest of MENA. The women and men who are protesting in the streets of Egypt, Bahrain, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Jordan and Algeria are not driven by international concerns such as the Arab-Israeli conflict, the relations between Islam and the West, or the United States policy in the region; instead, they are driven by domestic concerns, particularly unemployment, poverty, inequality, political oppression and corruption. They are protesting against the violations of their human rights by the domestic regimes, demanding a new social contract based on human rights rather than oppression; human security rather than fear; and human dignity rather than humiliation.

Despite the relevance of human rights to the politics and security of the MENA region, the topic has received scant attention among academic and policymaking circles since the UN adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. The current uprisings pose a serious challenge to the dominant assumption held by policy-makers and academics that human rights have little relevance to the study of the Middle East and North Africa. Academically, human rights in the Arab world received scant attention comparing to other regions in the developing world such as Africa and Latin America. Most of the literature on human rights in MENA has focused almost exclusively on women rights, the theoretical debate on the relations between Islam and human rights, and the Palestinian right for self-determination. Of course these are important concerns but they should not be the only ones. Economic, social, civil and political rights within the MENA states are also important as the current wave of rebellions in the region demonstrates.

Politically, great powers have never seriously pressured the ruling regimes for democratization and human rights protection even after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Communist threat. The United States and the European powers have pursued regional stability in MENA through supporting regime security, overlooking democracy and human rights concerns. But the traditional "stability promotion policies" pursued by the authoritarian regimes and great powers are actually one of main roots of the current instability in the region. The failure of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes and the current instability in the region are striking examples of the fragility of an exclusively realist approach to regional security. Not addressing the problems of inequality, poverty, unemployment, political oppression and corruption is what ended Mubarak and Ben Ali regimes. Order, domestic and international, cannot be sustained without justice.

Looking forward, the collapse of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes provides a structural opportunity to human rights promotion in the region. The failure of these two regimes provides a political space for human rights and democracy to emerge as an alternative foundation of regime legitimacy. At the same time, the fear of other dictators from meeting the same fate of Mubarak and Ben Ali, make them more vulnerable and hence more willing to implement political and economic reforms. Therefore, there is a historical opportunity for human rights promoters,

states and non-states actors alike, to improve human rights standards in the whole region. But nothing in the above should imply that it is going to be a rosy road; rather, regime building and transformation are actually much more difficult than regime failure and there is high uncertainty about the end of this process. But these difficulties and uncertainties should not deter the democratization process. Despite the peculiarity of the MENA region, there is no doubt that the literature on human rights and democratization in general as well as the literature on the experience of other regions transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy (especially the literature on Latin America and Post Soviet Union countries) would be of a vital resource for the transition period in the MENA, at least in Egypt and Tunisia.

For the purpose of this digest, the Middle East and North Africa includes Israel, Turkey, Iran and all the members of the Arab League: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. It is important to keep in mind the political, economic and cultural diversity within the MENA region. It contains: Arab and non-Arab states (Israel, Iran and Turkey); different regime types such as monarchical and republican regimes; different colonial legacies; oil and non-oil states; rich and poor states, small and large states, and Western and non-Western allies etc. It is also important to remember that there is no one single factor that accounts for human rights violations or promotion in the MENA region but rather a combination of domestic, regional and international factors.

To understand the complex reality of human rights in the MENA region, we should address it from different levels of analysis: domestic, state, sub-regional (such as Gulf, North Africa, Mashreq), regional (MENA), international (United Nations, EU, US, and China) and transnational (global civil society). The violation or protection of human rights in the region is influenced by the complex interaction of forces that operate at these different levels. Any strategy to promote human rights in any state or region should take this complex reality into account.

This topical research digest provides annotated bibliographies on different human rights topics in the MENA region. They were submitted as part of the requirement for the INTS 4945: Human Rights Research Design and Writing class at Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver (Spring 2010). Each student selected her/his own topic individually. As a result, the reader would find annotated bibliographies on a broad spectrum of topics including: human rights violations in Iran; child labor in Morocco and Egypt; Palestinian refugees; religious/ethnic minorities rights (the Coptic in Egypt, Bedouin women in Israel, and the Amazigh in Morocco). The reader will also find annotated bibliographies on: migrant workers in Saudi Arabia; human trafficking in the region; gays and lesbian rights; US renditions of terrorist suspects to Jordan as part of the war against terror; Somalia's health crisis, and human rights in Iraq. This digest is by no means comprehensive and it is not up to date in covering the recent events in the region. We hope the reader find this digest as a useful source for future human rights research and practice in the Middle East and North Africa.