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The 1989 Changes in Central and Eastern Europe: Lessons for the Arab Nations?

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Popular uprisings are not unusual, including those in favour of democratic goals, but it is when they occur in waves that they attract widespread attention. It is these multiple uprisings that also give rise to expectations of major change in a region, and the sense that we are witnessing the fall of regimes like collapsing dominoes; it is this that gives a sense of the world being changed in some significant way, well beyond any significance for the individual societies. So it was with the astonishing events of what came to be called the Arab Spring of 2011, and it is not surprising that it gave rise to comparisons with the anti-communist uprisings in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union two years later. It was this comparison that bolstered a sense of the world's geo-political map being redrawn, and that a new era of relations within and with the Arab nations was beginning.

By the summer of 2011, this heady excitement and high level of expectations had already given way to more sober assessments, as it became clear that fewer dominoes were falling than expected, and that regime change was probably going to be the exception not the rule. In spite of this, however, it is worthwhile to consider more closely the idea of comparing 1989 with 2011, and asking if in fact there are lessons to be learned. After all, in both cases it was not just popular rejection of a particular government or set of leaders, but a rejection of a type of system that was seen as illegitimate and against the interests of the population at large. Although participants varied in the precise agendas they were following, in addition to specific local issues there seems to have been a dominant desire to integrate the society with the outside world, to allow people to truly participate in what the rest of the

world was experiencing. In that sense, they were modernizing upheavals in favour of individual rights, fairness, and greater opportunity. This said, it is important to understand the experience of the post-Communist societies so far and its relevance in anticipating what to expect in the Arab nations.

In the two decades since the 1989 revolutions and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, there has been a sorting of the newly independent countries into three main groups. The most successful consists of those Central European countries that have become stable democracies, market economies, and members of the European Union. These nations made both political and economic transitions, rapidly and simultaneously. The second group is those societies further to the East that have made the transition to a more democratic polity, but that also remain economically underdeveloped and mixed in the ability of the political system to operate in a fully constitutional manner; this group has yet to consolidate its democracies. The final group consists of twelve of the fifteen former republics of the Soviet Union (excluding Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, all of which have joined the European Union and have been successful in their transitions). In all of these countries, democracy is weak and unstable; authoritarian rulers and high levels of corruption are the rule rather than the exception, and there are no reliable legal protections in place for the respective populations. To some degree, one can see Ukraine and Georgia as having made the most progress towards democracy, in that their elections are less interfered with. These two countries are, however, riven with internal divisions that have not yet been accommodated for institutionally, and that threaten to weaken democratic rule. In Central Asia, dictatorships of greater or lesser degree dominate the area, and in Russia (where the trappings of a free democracy are continually put on display) the trend is currently towards more and more control by the central authorities and an absence of the rule of law. In all of these former Soviet republics, the economies are undeveloped and in many cases are dependent on the sale of oil, gas, and other natural resources for survival. Thus, less than half

of the societies, that were sovereign nations following the collapse of Soviet communism, have made transitions to liberal democracy.

So, what can account for these very different paths since the end of the communist period? This has recently been called “the fundamental puzzle of post-communist politics”.¹ While research has, so far, produced no definite answer to this,² there are four broad sets of factors associated with success or failure in creating a democratic political system: a country’s prior history and experience; its geographic position; the actions of external agents; and the general global situation.

First, prior history can be a significant factor. As Gyula Horn, former prime Minister of Hungary once put it, the countries that became democracies did not have to invent anything, they just returned to what they had had earlier, though obviously not in exactly the same form. But his point is well taken; the foundations were already there in the minds of many of the population. Among the many prior conditions, we can distinguish such factors as previous democratic elements or experiences, the degree of repression exercised by the authoritarian regime, the length of time this was experienced, the existence of dissident groups and individuals with organizing or propaganda skills, the aspirations and resources of the new elites, the kinds of leaders who emerge from the uprisings, the mix of identities and loyalties (national, geographic, tribal, and so forth), educational levels, percentage of the population in rural and urban areas, and (importantly) the

¹ Ekiert, Grzegorz; Kubik, Jan; Vachudova, Milada Anna, 2007: “Democracy in the Post-Communist World: An Unending Quest?”, in: *East European Politics and Societies*, 21,1 (Winter): 7-30.

² Bunce, Valerie, 2003: “Rethinking Recent Democratization: Lessons from the Postcommunist Experience”, in: *World Politics*, 55,2: 167-192; Bunce, Valerie, 2009: “Reflections on 1989 and Authoritarianism”, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56,5 (September/October): 19-24; King, Charles, 2000: “Post-communism: Transition, Comparison, and the End of ‘Eastern Europe’”, in: *World Politics*, 53,1: 143-172 ; Linden, Ronald, 2009: “Reflections on 1989 – and After”, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56, 5: 3-10; Wolchik, Sharon, 2009: “1989: the Greatest Surprises”, in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 56, 5 (September/October):25-29.

relationship between state and society. The latter is of special significance since a state that is severely divorced from the population and has weakened support and legitimacy, will not be able to carry out the transition policies necessary for democratic development.³ In the case of Arab societies, there is no democratic past to return to, and the mix of social and political forces will make it difficult for these societies to find sufficient common ground to move ahead with a political system that would have widespread support and move the countries firmly in a democratic direction. A comparison with 1989, therefore, does not provide much room for optimism regarding this first factor.

Second, geographic factors were important in that each of the countries had neighbours who were going through the same process, and this subsequently served as a reinforcing element for reformers and for populations. In a sense, this made them part of a larger family of reformers, not isolated actors. Additionally, the closer the countries were to already developed democracies, the more of a demonstration effect there seemed to be. The further from Europe a country was, the less certain was its transition. Again, in the Arab case those societies closest to making a transition (mainly Tunisia and Egypt at this point) do not have neighbours that are going through the same changes; therefore, the demonstration effect and the psychological encouragement this can provide are absent. Arab nations will proceed alone and in relative isolation.

Third, external factors were important in the case of the post-Soviet states, and possibly decisive. Future membership in the EU was a constant aspiration for Central Europe, as well as for the fringes (but not for the former USSR save for the Baltic nations), and also a source of aid and support that offered tangible and realistically achievable outcomes. As a result, despite a coming

³ Eckart; Kubik; Vachudova, 2007, art.cit., see also: McFaul, Michael 2002: "The Fourth Wave of Democracy and Dictatorship", in: *World Politics*, 54, 2: 212-244; Matveeva, Anna, 2008: "Exporting Civil Society: The Post-Communist Experience", in: *Problems of Post-Communism*, 55,2 (March-April): 3-13.

and going of governments of very different political colours, there was continuity in the commitment to democratic development and meeting the requirements of the EU Acquis. The importance this had with respect to long-term development cannot be overestimated. In the case of Arab nations, there is no such external force, and it will need to be created.

The general global situation is less easily identified, but it is worth noting that the post-1989 cases occurred during a period of relative calm internationally and stable economic conditions. The global economy was moving ahead quickly, but the emerging nations had not yet posed a high level of competition on the more developed economies. The opportunities were therefore greater for the post-Soviet nations to enter the global marketplace. The contrast with the global situation facing the Arab nations is stark. The global economy is weaker than it was in post-Soviet societies, and Europe is focused on its own economic and political problems. Both financial and political capital is unlikely to be available to Arab countries in the form and on the scale that was provided for in post-Soviet nations. It will, therefore, be more difficult for them to find support and opportunities from the regional and global economies.

Making progress on democratic reforms is no guarantee that the process will be successful. In fact, from the 140 or so democracies in the world, at most two out of three of them could be considered fully democratic. Not only do many democratically elected governments use undemocratic means to stay in power, but they intervene in what should be independent actions of legislative and judicial branches, and may go as far as to change the rules to stay in power beyond their legal mandate. Meanwhile, in many democracies, continuing problems of high inequality, poverty, corruption, and lack of accountability alienate important segments of the population and threaten both the stability and legitimacy of democratic rule. For Arab nations these are factors that are already significant, and are likely to remain so in the foreseeable future. It is economic and social problems such as these that frequently pose

a threat in both fragile and consolidated democracies, and the data on Latin America reveal this clearly.

In 2004, the UNDP published a report on the state of democracy in Latin America⁴, from which it was clear that in spite of the spread of democratic regimes during the previous couple of decades, support for democracy was not deep or unconditional. Thus, even where the majority (albeit a small one) of the population claims to be in favour of democracy as a political system, it is the problems of daily life that drive choices. When given a choice between respect for democratic rules and limitations on the power of leaders on the one hand, and greater economic growth and a higher standard of living on the other, it is the latter that tends to win, even among the self-defined democratic. It is this phenomenon that opens the way for would-be rulers to come to power or to extend their powers, by promising to deliver improvements in daily life in exchange for more power for themselves. In 2011, almost three decades after Latin America's democratic revolutions, only a handful could be said to be relatively safe from increasing authoritarianism. In most of Latin America, political parties are distrusted, ethnic tensions remain high, inequality remains extreme, and governments are seen as unmindful of the problems facing the majority of the population. While these phenomena can be found even in fully developed democracies, it is in the new democracies that they are most troublesome, because the institutions that can protect a democracy in times of stress are weakly developed, are unable to ward off interference, have little experience of operating independently, and have weak support from the population at large.⁵ Looking ahead, and bearing in mind the situations found in Arab societies, it is the

⁴ United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), 2004: *Report on Democracy in Latin America*. Available at: <http://www.un-ngls.org/orf/eng-executivesummary.doc>.

⁵ For an account of the Latin American patterns see Smith, Peter; Kearney, Matthew, 2010: "Transitions, Interrupted: Routes Toward Democracy in Latin America", in: *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 6,1 (July): 137-163.

experience of Latin America that may be of most relevance to the Arab world, rather than that of the former communist nations.

The Arab uprisings have shown the world that the desire for democracy among large sections of the Arab populations is strong, and that there is a willingness to take huge personal risks in order to achieve it. What is not so obvious, however, is what exactly people mean by democracy and the form it should take, for views on this differ from one part of the world to another. In particular, the Latin American situation shows that expressed support for democracy may not mean what people in the developed democracies might think, since it is outcomes (especially economic ones) that are of greatest importance. In the Arab case, a similar chance for misunderstanding exists regarding the role of religion in politics. Thus, “Many Arab citizens express support for the influence of Islam in government and politics. This is not the view of all citizens, however. In contrast to support for democracy, which is expressed by the overwhelming majority of the respondents in the Arab Barometer and other recent surveys, men and women in every country where surveys have been conducted are divided on the question of whether Islam should play an important political role. For example, whereas 56 percent of the respondents in the Arab Barometer surveys agree with the statement that men of religion should have influence over government decisions, 44 percent disagree, indicating that they believe Islam should *not* play an important political role. Further, the division of opinion observed among all respondents is present to the same degree among those who express support for democracy”.⁶

As Munck has argued persuasively, defining and measuring “democracy” has always been a difficult task, made more complex by the fact that actions and policies are linked with whether

⁶ Jamal, Amaney; Tessler, Mark, 2008: “Attitudes in the Arab World”, in: *Journal of Politics*, 19,1 (January): 102. See also Fattah, Moataz, 2010: “Muslims’ Particular Affinity with Autocracy: A Myth or Reality?”, in: *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 6,1 (July): 55-79.

societies are ranked as democratic or not. Also, he shows that since people hold multiple, often conflicting, values they engage in trade-offs; in many cases economic and social values can trump those of a democratic polity. And what theorists see as a set of mutually reinforcing values that constitute “democracy”, may not be what populations think or adhere to. A key puzzle, he notes, is that “the significant gains with regard to electoral democracy over the last twenty-five years have not been accompanied by positive comparative changes with regard to other desired goals, such as the rule of law and economic equality. Politics seems to involve inescapable choices that require weighing complex trade-offs.”⁷

Among the most frequently cited factors that can be expected to contribute to the development of democracy are economic development and education, and in many studies there is a correlation between them. However, since correlation does not amount to causation, it is hard to know in which direction the influence runs. These factors can be seen as both a result of and a contributor to democratic systems, and researchers have yet to show decisively what their significance is. In addition, these factors have different effects depending on the situation, including the nature of the authoritarian system that precedes an attempted move to democracy.⁸ In the case of education, while there is a correlation between the level of education and a nation’s democracy rating, there are many outliers. Moreover, in some countries an increase in education can lead to less support for democracy, since it results in greater identification with ethnic and tribal origins and more tolerance for conflict.⁹ As an article in *The*

⁷ Munck, Gerardo L., 2009: *Measuring Democracy: A Bridge between Scholarship and Politics* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press):130.

⁸ Hadenius, Axel; Teorell, Jan, 2005: “Cultural and Economic Prerequisites of Democracy: Reassessing Recent Evidence”, in: *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 39,4: 87-106.

Hadenius, Axel; Teorell, Jan, 2007: “Pathways from Authoritarianism”, in: *Journal of Democracy*, 18,1 (January): 143-156.

⁹ Friedman, Willa; Kremer, Michael; Miguel, Edward; Thornton, Rebecca, 2011: “Education as Liberation?”, *NBER Working Paper* 16939 (April). National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER).

Economist has recently put it, education “may make people more interested in improving their own lives but they may not necessarily see democracy as the way to do it. Even in established democracies, more education does not always mean either more active political participation or greater faith in democracy. In India, for example, poorer and less educated people vote in larger numbers than their more educated compatriots. Indeed, the latter often express disdain for, and impatience with, the messiness of democracy. Many yearn instead for the kind of government that would execute the corrupt and build highways, railway lines and bridges at the dizzying pace of authoritarian China.”¹⁰ If this pattern of rural voting holds in the case of the upcoming elections in Tunisia and Egypt, the consequences for democratic transition will not be good, especially if economic problems are foremost in people’s minds; this is, of course, in addition to any effect that differences in religious values may have.

The complicated relationship between economic and political goals can frequently make it difficult to achieve one without relinquishing the other, and this is always a problem for countries attempting democratic transitions. The most successful post-communist societies were able to achieve both political and economic goals, and in the longer term economic growth enabled this to be a mutually reinforcing process. In contrast, apart from revenue from natural resources, the former Soviet republics have had neither political nor economic progress in any real sense. The challenge facing Arab transitions is essentially economic; since if growth that provides opportunities for employment is not achieved the creation and protection of democratic rule will be difficult. It has been economic failure (for example, from 1980 to 2010 the average annual growth in per capita GDP was about 0,5 percent, compared to more than 4 percent for Asia, and about 1 percent for Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa) and isolation from the global market that were major contributors to the revolts. Arab countries do not have to invent a market economy (as the post-

¹⁰ “Degrees of Democracy”, *The Economist*, 339, 8739 (25 June – 1 July 2011): 88.

Soviet ones have had to do), but their private sectors are weak and patriarchal. These economies are characterized by “a dominant state, kleptocratic monopolies, heavy regulation, and massive subsidies. This has fuelled corruption, stunted growth and left millions without jobs”.¹¹ State involvement in the economy and the lack of economic growth sufficient to raise living standards in the face of rapidly growing population, means that the state has had to resort to massive subsidies to buy stability in addition to that provided by authoritarian controls. As part of the economic reforms that are crucially necessary, subsidies will have to be drastically reduced and budgets brought more into balance, but this cuts across attempts to create a democracy, since the pain of change could well weaken support for reform. This certainly happened after the 1989 revolutions, and it was only the lure of membership in the European Union that kept successive governments (and they came and went in fairly rapid succession) on track with reforms. In the former republics of the USSR (save for the three Baltic nations), this factor was absent, and there was nothing even remotely similar that could have prevented the regression to authoritarian rule.

The pain of transition, when the economy will worsen for a while just as the government pulls back and reduces or eliminates subsidies, will be tolerated for a short period if the new leaders move quickly to do the things that cause most pain; there is a window of opportunity for a period of time immediately following the revolution. But soon the daily stresses become too much to accept quietly, and people can turn on their new leaders and accuse them of failing to address the needs of the population. This was dramatically seen in Poland, where Lech Walesa went from universal adulation before 1989, to a widely hated figure when he was President of Poland and pursuing painful reforms.

Attempts to buy peace by increasing subsidies and raising salaries of public employees, as has already been done in Egypt, only postpone the problems and waste a valuable opportunity for

¹¹ “Open for Business”, *The Economist*, 339, 8739 (25 June – 1 July 2011): 16.

real reforms when the public would accept them. The bloated ranks of government employees will need to be drastically reduced, before the economy is capable of absorbing the costs, the inefficient firms in the private sector will need to rationalize their operations and increase productivity (again adding to unemployment, and potential unrest), and long-term strategies will need to be put in place to enable survival in an extremely competitive and sophisticated global economy.

The latter will be one of the most difficult tasks of future governments, since the relative isolation of the Arab world from the global economy for many decades must be abolished, before this part of the world falls even further behind in competitiveness and opportunity for its people. In short, the problems of the past do not vanish merely because there is a different kind of political system; in fact, they may become even more salient, as they are brought into the open and the costs of dealing with them are faced. During the perestroika period in the Soviet Union, the new openness in cataloging the nation's problems and the extent of its backwardness was a very destabilizing factor.

Past experience shows that creating and consolidating a democratic polity is a very uneven and, at times, unsuccessful activity. Often, the results are difficult to categorize unambiguously, and even where the outcomes can be defined as democratic, they may take many forms. In addition to the factors at work in all transitions, in the Arab case a special place has to be given to the development of more transparency in government and a significant reduction in corruption. As the events in India demonstrate, this is a matter people feel strongly about since it touches on all aspects of life, in addition to the issue of unfairness and cost. And these reforms will have to be pursued quickly. The literature on democracy creation shows that delays in change, partial reforms, and a sense of social and economic injustice can jeopardize any attempt at transition. Populations can tolerate pain for a while, as long as the emotional investment in an uprising lasts, but there is a definite limit, beyond which disillusionment and withdrawal of support set in.

One way in which the pain can be, if not alleviated, beneficial is to have an external force that reinforces domestic dreams of a better life. This was clearly the case after 1989 in Central Europe, where the desire to join the European Union kept regimes on track. But where is such an external factor to be found for the Arab states? They are as isolated from each other, as they are from the wider world;¹² thus, the prospects for some kind of regional Arab union are considered as remote. Some observers are already suggesting such a role for the Union for the Mediterranean-Barcelona Process, but this is so dysfunctional that it is hard to see how it can succeed in the new situation.¹³ In addition, it is merely a vague promise with no tangible benefits, beyond environmental improvements and better transportation. This is not enough. The Barcelona experience is also tainted with perceptions of European ulterior motives (whether true or not), and so suspicions would be hard to overcome. What is needed, and quickly, is a new plan of action that has real and realistic benefits for those countries making progress on democratic issues, including financial support. Such a plan would require a strong sense of Arab ownership, and would have to be in a form that successive governments would find attractive enough to trump other agendas. Such a plan does not yet exist, but it would be worth developing and doing it fast. Without it, the domestic problems facing reformers can easily derail their efforts.

As parts of the Arab world attempt to move away from authoritarian systems, it is likely that there will be a long period during which both the participants and the observers will have their optimism shaken. During such times, we should not forget that all democracies are in fact flawed, and are, as yet, a work in progress; the issue is whether or not the flaws eventually undermine the democratic foundations. What the Arab nations

¹² Lewis, Bernard, 2009: "Free at Last?", in: *Foreign Affairs*, 89,2 (March/April): 77-88.

¹³ Youngs, Richard, 2011: "What Not to Do in the Middle East and North Africa", *Policy Brief* 70 (March), FRIDE, Madrid Spain.

have in their favour, however, are populations willing to struggle and to risk their lives for a better future, and a wealth of information based on best practices from other societies that have already experienced successful transitions. There is no need for Arab reformers to feel they are alone; the lessons of history are on their side.