Revolution: Causes and Consequences of the Arab Spring
Outline of talk

I. What is a revolution? Does the Arab Spring constitute a revolution?

II. The Arab Spring in comparative perspective
   A. Causes
   B. The fate of revolutionary movements
I. What is a revolution? What is in a name?

- Industrial revolution (Britain 1750s on)
- Social revolution (the 1960s)
- Cultural revolution (again the 1960s; China)
- Political revolutions (American 1776, French 1789; USSR 1917, etc.etc.)
- Revolution in military affairs (today’s high tech warfare)
Narrowing the field: Revolutions that involve political change

- A working definition of political revolution (Jack Goldstone)
  - "an effort to transform the political institutions and the justifications for political authority in society..
  - accompanied by formal or informal mass mobilization
  - and noninstitutionalized actions that undermine authorities."
But even then...

Types of Political Revolutions:

- Republican revolutions
  - (English 1640; American 1776; French 1789)
- Marxist
  - (Russia 1917, China 1949)
- Against dictatorship
  - (Iran 1979)
- Against communism
  - (East Europe, USSR 1989)
“Mapping” revolutions is thus complex:

- Multiple dimensions are involved
- Revolutions are short and intense—but what is the relevant time frame?
- Sometimes multiple revolutions within the same time span
- We only get a full picture in hindsight.
II. Revolutions in Comparative Perspective

• Thinking about the Arab Spring by reflecting on clear-cut cases of revolution:
  • England 1640-1649;
  • American Revolution 1776-1783
A. Causes of Revolutions

1. External context and pressure:
   - Economic pressures and taxation
   - International war
   - Colonial intrusion
   - Globalization today? (USSR 1991)

2. Existing internal structural tension
   - Economic divisions (class tensions; unemployed, etc)
   - Groups that lack political voice
   - Inherited privilege vs. meritocracy
   - Groups excluded from economic opportunity or appointments (corruption)
B. What is at stake in revolutionary episodes?

Two important interim conclusions:

1. Revolutions create space for alternative conceptions of social, political, and cultural order—fundamental transformation of society, culture and politics
2. Revolutions create opportunities for

a) Charismatic leaders
   - Non-routine, not rule bound, and not beholden to their followers
   - The charismatic leader advances an alternative comprehensive world view, a new future
   - The leader re-defines the realm of the possible

b) Organizations and institutions that have a comprehensive alternative view
   - The Communist party’s “Iron Vanguard of the Revolution”
   - Religious organizations
D. Where does the Arab Spring fit?

• *Is it a revolution?*
  • Yes (multiple dimensions; large group mobilization; existing political hierarchy has been challenged)
  • Self description by the participants as a revolutionary movement: The intent to overthrow the regime and transform society, culture
E. Causes of the Arab Spring?

• 1. External pressure: economic retardation
• Rank of some MENA countries in economic development
  • Rank in unemployment rate (CIA 2010): Egypt 101; Tunisia 136; Libya 176; Yemen 181; Gaza strip 183;
  • But particularly high among the young and educated
  • Inflation: Algeria 128; Tunisia 128; Syria 129; S. Arabia 155; Gaza 163; West Bank 168; Egypt 205 (11 %)

• Perception of relative stagnation
• 2. Internal dissatisfaction
• Corruption rankings (Transparency International)
  • Tunisia 73; Morocco 80; Algeria and Egypt 112 (tied); Yemen 164; Libya 168;
• Age distribution (Egypt 33% younger than 14 years, Syria 35% compare US 20%; Germany 13%)
• Lack of democratic input (Syrian Assad family in power since 1970)
• Unrest due to the gap between rising expectations and outcomes
  • Educational opportunities improved in some countries but not economic upward mobility.
  • In Tunisia in 2001 those with higher education (college) and those with no to little education faced an 11% unemployment rate.
  • By 2010 almost 25% of those with higher education were unemployed, compared to 6% of those with little education.
III. Possible outcomes of the Arab Spring. Concerns for Democracy

• General point made earlier:
  • Charismatic leaders and strong
  • organizations win out in revolutionary struggles

• Who are the leaders and institutions with alternative, comprehensive views?

• Who are well organized?