

The Phenomenon of Arab Spring in the Middle East

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Doi:10.5901/mjss.2015.v6n4s2p152

Abstract

The term Arab Spring or its Arabic term, al-Rabi' al-Arabi is the revolution of demonstrations and protests of the people against the ruling Government. It was claimed to begin on December 18, 2010 in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. However, this outbreak also spreads to several other Western Asian countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. As such, this article aims to analyze the phenomenon of Arab Spring happening in those countries. This article also aims to explore how the outbreak of the unrest occurred and identify the factors that led to the protests of the people as well as to review the role of mass media in the revolution of the people. This study uses a qualitative method which is a document analysis approach to synthesize information from authoritative resources to ensure the validity of the information obtained. The study found that the wave of revolution was the people's protests against the current ruling Government. Several factors such as political, economic, and social factors are the main cause leading to the phenomenon of Arab Spring. Although this may be attributed to issues or problems that vary for each country, the goal of the rise of the people remains the same, i.e. protesting against unfair Government and demanding that people's rights be reinstated.

Keywords: Arab spring; revolution; upheavals; Middle East;

1. Introduction

The rise of the people that broke out in the Arab world due to political conflict has attracted the attention of the public. This issue is no longer alien in countries that previously ignored and isolated themselves from the political development of the world. The people's uprising which began in Tunisia in December 2010 that triggered people's revolt then spread to Egypt and Libya and protracted to other Arab countries. However, this event has started around two years earlier, in Yemen in 2009 and Bahrain in 2010. Nonetheless, both uprisings seemed ignored and overlooked as the protests only occurred on a small scale. Most of the events have one similar purpose, to demand for a fair and equitable ruling. Thus, indirectly, this is one of the factors leading to the uprising and the people sought for a transformation that would take place in their country. In addition, the mass media is also seen to be the most effective medium not only to disseminate information, but also as a medium of communication to uplift the spirit of the people to rise against the leading of the reign (Haas, 2013).

2. The term 'Arab Spring'

The wave of revolution, or more popularly known as the Arab Spring, refers to rebellion that occurs among people. This uprising is the voice of the people demanding their rights to be reinstated from the current ruling Government. Arab Spring or in Arabic term al-Arabi al-Rabi' is the people's protests against the injustice of the ruling system and demand for a more democratic new government. The people seemed to just realize that all this while they had been oppressed and their rights had been denied, thus, they oppose the current existing leaders. When people are not allowed to speak, street demonstrations are the only alternative. The government regime treated this similarly as to what happened in Palestine as the people who fought against the Zionist were considered terrorists and against peace. The turmoil of the Arab world has impacted the rest of the world (Gordon, 2010).

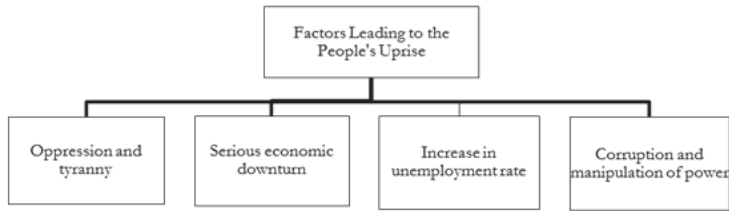


Figure 1. Factors Leading to the People's Uprise

Figure 1 shows factors leading to the rise of the people in Arab countries. People showed their protest against the Government's tyranny which had been occurring for a long time. Suppression by inhumane Government regime led people to rise to claim their long-ignored freedom rights. Serious economic downturn and the increase of unemployment rate were also among factors leading to the people's uprising in the Arab world. Corruption and manipulation of power were among the issues that gained attention and stirred up the people's discontent. These issues that triggered the anger of the people were old news. This is because the Government's promise to seriously wipe out corruption was not fulfilled, therefore increasing the hatred of the people. This is exacerbated by the fact that corruption was practised by the people's own leader. These factors have been identified as the main causes of the people's uprising and the Government is certainly forced to fix the damage. Among the countries witnessing the rise of the people are Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria (Rachman, 2014).

3. Tunisia

The rise of the people in the Arab world was said to begin in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, December 2010. The Tunisian revolution, also known as Jasmin Revolution, began with the event of a young 26-year-old Abu Bouazizi who burned himself as a sign of protest against a government official who insulted him and seized his business goods. Bouazizi was a local university graduate and due to the economic downturn and the serious unemployment problem which hit Tunisia at that time, Bouazizi was forced to sell fruits and vegetables to support his family.

As a result of such event, it eventually led to the revolution of the people to protest against oppression and injustice ruling over the years. Nonetheless, the death of Bouazizi was not the main cause the uprising of the Tunisians, but the truth is the people's protest was against the economic turmoil that has been continuing for a long time. Besides that, the increase of unemployment rate especially among youths causing people to live in hardship was also among factors of rebellion. Finally, a grudge that had been suppressed over the years incited people's anger and further led to the wave of revolution protesting injustice and expressing discontent against corruption and manipulation of power (Middlebrooke et al., 2011).

The consequence of the event had brought great changes in the political, economic and social sectors in Tunisia. The increase in food inflation rate caused people to live in poverty and starvation due of the increased cost of living. The turmoil had resulted in the loss of thousands of lives and this was largely an act of government regime and the security forces that attacked the rebelling citizens. However, the unity of the people of Tunisia managed to overthrow the Government and eventually led to the resignation of the President of Tunisia, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, on 14 January 2011. Ben Ali, who had ruled Tunisia for 23 years, toppled for failing to give a good life to Tunisian citizens, especially from political, economic, and social aspects (Middlebrooke et al., 2011).

4. Egypt

Egypt is a country in North Africa that borders with Libya in the West, Sudan in the South, Gaza Strip and Israel, the Mediterranean Sea in the North and the Red Sea in the East. Statistically in 2007, the Egyptian population is 73 million where 94 percent are Muslim and another 3 percent are people of other nationalities.

Armed with the spirit of the Tunisian uprising which had successfully overthrew the dictator Ben Ali, the Egyptian people wanted to prove that they are also able to overthrow the leader dubbed 'Pharaoh in the modern era'. The rise of the Tunisian people had led the people of Egypt to oppose tyranny and cruelty of the ruling regime. For 30 years citizens were pressured under the reign of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. The wave of Egypt revolution, starting on 25 January 2011, took place over 18 days (Zalkapli, 2012).

Among the main factors identified as to cause of the rise of the people is economic downturn. Combined with lack of employment opportunities, the unemployment problem also increased. In addition, the price hike of goods and the rising cost of living certainly pushed the people to rebel. The Egyptian people no longer wanted to live under the reign of Hosni Mubarak and finally rose up to reclaim their rights. This uprising was a protest against the attitude of the Government leaders who misused people's money but at the same time leaving the people in poverty and their needs ignored. Even so, the citizens' insistence for the Government to fix the problem was ignored as the Government turned over a deaf ear over the people's request.

To strengthen the position of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, he manipulated national institutions such as the police force and homeland security to suppress and oppress people who attempted to rebel and demand that democracy is upheld. This is because the integrity of the election process was questioned and its validity fell under suspicion. Through elections held in November and December 2010, Hosni Mubarak had won with more than 80 percent of the vote as a result of Egyptian voters support. For Egyptian people, this was a decision that could not be trusted and they considered the election process as an unsuitable medium to appoint the ruling Government. Therefore, the only choice left for the Egyptians was street demonstrations to represent the voice and needs of the people who were long since neglected by the Government. The event in Egypt was the people's protest to bring down Hosni Mubarak who was being unjust to the people (Aburwen, 2013).

Despite various efforts by Hosni Mubarak to win the hearts of the people, they proved to be unsuccessful as the people's revolution continued. It was a consequence attributed to various parties including the people of Egypt themselves and finally on 11 February 2011 Hosni Mubarak resigned and handed his powers to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces. After two days of handover of power to the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, the military government under the leadership of Mohamed Hussein Tantawy announced the suspension of the national constitution, dissolution of Parliament, and that the military would govern for six months until elections can be held again. However, the revolution still continued until the end of 2011 due to people's concern with the seemingly ineffective role of the Supreme Council in bringing a new change. The effect of turmoil in Egypt had brought deficiencies in the political sector, further threatening the country's development. The battle had caused the people to suffer due to destruction to property and loss of home (Aburwen, 2013).

5. Libya

After four days of Hosni Mubarak's downfall in Egypt, the Arab Land revolution began to spread to Libya. Anti-government protests began in Libya on 15 February 2011. Seen from the naked eye, it seemed like the people's uprising was to demand for Muammar Gaddafi to claim responsibility on killing 14 protestors in 2006. In fact, the rise of the Libyan people was to protest against the tyranny of the ruling (Haas & Lesch, 2013).

For a 42-year reign, it was somewhat difficult for Muammar Gaddafi to resign and he even continued to defend his reign, threatening the people that the country would face a civil war should people's revolution continued. Despite various threats and actions by Gaddafi, the Libyans' revolution continued and had already dominated most of the country. This includes Libya's largest city, Benghazi. As a result of the revolution, support for Gaddafi started to decrease as some of the government regime's diplomats, military officers, and security officers chose the people's side. This support managed to uplift the spirit of the Libyan people to rise against the existing Government.

Tyranny and cruelty of leaders were seen as the main cause of the people's uprising in Libya. The people were fed up and tired with the government's ruling which had always oppressed and disregarded the interests of the people. The people sought for political and social freedom which was long since denied. The rise of the people was among people's protests against the Government, reclaiming the rights they should be given but denied. In addition, the people's anger also stemmed from internal factors as the government established relations with big powers that only made the ruling regime as a puppet to protect their interests in Arab countries. In return, the Arab leaders were bribed with money and a wide range of assistance, including military.

To ensure that his reign remained, Gaddafi had used a variety of tactics and tricks to maintain his powers in Libya. Among his efforts was using mercenaries from Africa to attack protestors demonstrating in the heart of Tripoli. Gaddafi's insistence to maintain his ruling had made it difficult for the people's uprising. This had led to thousands of deaths not only of the Libyan citizens, but military army as well. The national turmoil also caused destruction of property and homes. However, after 42 years and after more than eight months of people's revolution, the Gaddafi ruling ultimately toppled on 20 October 2011. During the revolution, Gaddafi died after suffering serious injuries due to bomb attacks from NATO fighter jets and he was the first ruler who was killed in the series of people's uprising in Arab countries.

6. Yemen

In the heat of people's revolution issue in a number of Arab countries followed by the success of bringing down the ruling government, revolution continued to spread to Yemen. Anti-government protests appeared in the districts of North and South Yemen in mid-January 2011. About over 20 000 people flooded the main roads in the city of Sana'a and held rally protests against the government. This rally was named as 'The Rage Day'. The anti-government protester in Yemen had already assembled in great numbers since the outbreak of the uprising in Tunisia and this was further driven by the people's unity to rise up and reclaim their rights (Nevens, 2011).

The people who were hungry for change had assembled outside the University of Sana'a as a sign of protest against the government. Looking the wave of revolution, Yemen president Ali Abdullah felt threatened and announced that he would step down once his mandate ends in two years time. He also promised that his descendants would not take over and fill the ruling position. Even so, people were skeptical with Ali Abdullah's promise as he had ruled Yemen for 32 years. This is due to the fact that Ali Abdullah had made the same promise in 2006 but failed to deliver when he still contested for a seat in the elections. People's efforts to bring President Ali down continued when, on June 3rd, his office building was destroyed by explosions resulting in injury. On 23 September, Ali Abdullah was forced to sign an agreement on the transfer of power. Finally, he withdrew and gave power to his successor.

The people who had been living in misery were no longer willing to live under the rule of dictator leaders who ignored the interests of the people. People sought for a change in the ruling government, someone who would care for their interests and welfare. It was observed that Yemen is the poorest country in the Arab world. Almost half of the Yemeni population lived below the poverty line, earning RM6 (USD 2) a day. Similarly, children in Yemen, due to high poverty rate, were not able to go to school as they were forced to work at such a young age. The turmoil in Yemen had led to an increase in death toll. Its people lived in torture due to the loss of family members and homes. Their distress and suffering were not only ignored, but a number of people had died due to starvation (Abney, 2013).

7. Syria

As the issue of the revolution of the people was hotly mentioned in several other regional Arab countries, the wave continued to spread to the country of Syria. Syria is a country of constant turmoil since the reign of Hafez al-Assad, who ruled for 32 years, followed by his son Basyar al-Assad. Hafez al-Assad pledged as a Shi'a Nusairiyah who opposes and holds grudges towards the Sunni. The Syrian Government is strongly supported by Iran and Hizbullah in Lebanon and they further supported Hafez al-Assad in killing his own people.

As observed, every country witnessing the uprise of its people has their own issues, and so does Syria. The 1982 bloody conflict in Mites had occurred for 27 days, sacrificing almost 46,000 thousand residents. This event had caused the people of Syria to steer away from politics. However, after quite a while they rose again to protest the government's tyranny and this had spread to other towns such as Dar'aa, Hauran, Halab, even to 157 regions in Syria. Nevertheless, the rise of Syrian people in March 2011 started from a number of boys who scribbled the school walls with "As-Shaab Yurid Iskaat el Nizam! (People want to bring down the regime)". This Slogan was shouted in revolting countries such as Egypt, Libya, Yemen and several other Arab countries.

Following the event, the Syrian security force arrested the children. They were jailed, ill-treated, and even tortured by yanking out their nails as well as sodomized. As a result, one of the boys died and his family demanded for his body. They also appealed to the security force to release other children who were still in custody. However, the government agreed to release the children under one condition: exchange the children with Syrian women to wed. This sparked up anger among the Syrians as it was an act of insult. Thus, they revolted and lifted their weapons to defend themselves and this eventually led to the rise of the people in Syria.

The truth is, this chain of events regarding people's revolution was due to some main issues that had long since suppressed: the continuing oppression and cruelty of the ruling regime for 40 years. Corruption and manipulation of power by government officials and leaders were some of the issues that gained attention and stirred up discontent among Syrian people. The rise of the people demanded for resignation of the Syrian and a change in the ruling regime conquered by the al-Assad family. The people no longer wanted to live under the autocratic reign and they claimed for the people's liberation. The rise of citizens continued and strengthened. More and more soldiers stood along the people to protect citizens who joined rallies as they refused to allow the Basyar al-Assad regime to cruelly kill its own people on a whim. Since the turmoil, many were killed while the injured were untreated and left to die.

The Arab organizations (Arab League) had taken steps pertaining to the events in Syria where they prohibited Syrian officials from entering their regions. This included two countries of Iraq and Lebanon as Syrian leaders were Shi'a

supporters and they always asked for assistance from Iraq, a Shi'a country. In Syria, the rise of the people who were desperate for change in the Government led by President Bashar al-Assad, had now become a nightmare when it erupted into a civil war that had now dragged on for more than two years, killed more than 70, 000 lives, and forced more than 1.4 million residents of Syria to become refugees. In Syria, the slogan of government 'change' not only claimed many lives, but witnessed the destruction of the country in front of their own people.

8. The Role of Mass Media

Behind the rise of the people in the Middle East, the role of the mass media was highlighted, driven by youths to show courage in speech and actions expressing their rights in their respective countries. Whenever youths were mentioned, it would definitely be associated with the influence of the mass media in the lives of youth (Abdul Malik, 2012).

The revolution outbreak was due to the function of the mass media: the Internet. It turned out that the role of the digital virtual world via short messaging system (SMS), social networks like Facebook and Twitter played a major role in urging the demonstrations to overthrow Hosni Mubarak. The influence of Facebook is undeniable because it has been proven that even small news can spread to the rest of the world in a blink of an eye. A similar case took place after Wael Ghonim created the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Sa'id" that called for Egyptians to protest in street rallies. The opening of the page was dedicated to a 28 year old Egyptian youth named Khaled Sa'id, who was cruelly killed by two Egyptian policemen.

On 6 June 2010, Egypt was shocked by the death of a young man named Khalid Sa'id who was cruelly beaten and tortured by the police in public. Khalid was hunted and killed for his act of uploading a video clip on Youtube, where it recorded corrupt police activities with a drug smuggling syndicate. This sparked the fury of the police and he was eventually detained by two policemen from the Sidi Jabir station, an area in the province of Alexandria. The two officers were Mahmud Solah and 'Iwadh Ismail, and Khalid demanded for a reason why he was detained and with evidence. The policemen, furious with the question, beat Khalid to death. Witnesses saw how Khaled was taken by the two policemen, his head smashed to the wall and stairs of a building until he died. As the people feared for their lives, they were not able to defend Khalid despite knowing Khalid was innocent. His body was left on the roadside, and following a post-mortem, police issued a statement saying Khalid died due to drug overdose (Chokoshvili, 2011).

Khalid's family members demanded for both officers to be brought to court and sentenced to death (qisas against them). Finally, on 26 October 2011, the Alexandria criminal court sentenced them to prison for seven years and above. Nevertheless, some human rights organizations consider this sentence too light as Khalid was cruelly killed. The opening of the Facebook page "We Are All Khaled Sa'id" managed to attract one million Egyptian citizens of various religions and the United Nations, who voiced out against the reign of Hosni Mubarak. Undeniably, some attacks or obstructions were made by the ruling party in efforts to prevent the rise of the people. The government's mass media played an important role in efforts to curb the rise of voice of the people. To prevent the ability of activism protesters who organized street rallies, the government of Egypt had increased its efforts by limiting national access to the Internet for three days. From 28 January 2011, internet communication and mobile phone services including SMS delivery were blocked and terminated. This limitation was withdrawn as the restrictions caused more people to flood Tahrir Square to voice out their desire (Abdul Malik, 2012).

The government-owned newspaper, Al-Jumhuriyah also reported "Mubarak's popularity built on people's poverty became weak and eventually collapsed. The new President must be transparent," in the middle of the report it claimed Mubarak and members of his family had reaped a huge wealth during his reign. Many television stations broadcasted false news as if nothing happened. The truth was, at that time, hundreds of people had died and the Tahrir Square was flooded by people revolting. However, what was shown on television was only dozens of people. Egyptian television stations, controlled by the military government, allegedly lied to people and the world when they posted false videos of the Tahrir Square filled with millions of opponents of Morsi. Television station al-Jazeera also allegedly broadcasted the same video with the Egyptian television (Sulaiman, 2014). As the issue of the revolution of the people was hotly mentioned in several other regional

9. Concluding Remarks

Looking at the outbreak of people's revolution in the Arab Lands, it shows that the reign of an iron fist that oppresses the people will not be able to survive despite having close relationship with other large powers and possessing military dominance. The event of 'Arab Spring' is a phenomenon that has changed the land territory of the world, initially leading to political changes in the Western Asian regions and in turn led to the downfall of the ruling regime. The demise of

autocratic systems in several countries in the Middle East and North Africa brings new hope to the people in their respective countries who are also experiencing this phenomenon. Political changes bring a huge impact on the region of the Arab world. Oppression and the tyranny of the Government eventually triggered wave of people's revolution. The climax of people's rage is reached after witnessing the ruling party misusing national wealth, reaping it, and robbing it for the sake of personal interests and their cronies. The rise of the people is to demand for freedom from the unjust ruling system which has been gripping their lives for, in some cases, nearly half a century. This is proven by observing the political situation that began with the rise of the people in Tunisia, which triggers a revolution to bring down the Government, then spreading to Egypt and Libya and protracted to other Arab countries. Most have a similar purpose, namely, to demand for a leadership that is fair and equitable.

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