Arab Cities in Revolution: Some Observations

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Are the revolutions we are currently witnessing in Tunisia and Egypt essentially urban revolutions? Éric Verdeil examines the problems facing the economies and public services of Arab cities, which have, in part, given rise to these movements.

Like many observers, I have been keenly watching and left somewhat dumbfounded by the extraordinary events that have unfolded since 14 January in Tunisia and which, over the last week, have also spread to Egypt (a country I know very little about, I must confess). However, in retrospect, I realise that there were in fact a number of signs during my visit to Tunisia last autumn and in my contacts with colleagues in Sfax that should have caught my attention – as should have the Facebook petition against Ben Ali running for a sixth term in office, signed by a surprising number of people in late September. Furthermore, the indignation in reaction to the Trabelsi family's activities was also the subject of many conversations in Sfax in November.

In this article, I would like to share some of my observations concerning certain aspects of the protests, which have spread like wildfire from Tunisia to Egypt, Jordan and Yemen. These observations are made in my capacity as a geographer who is familiar with numerous Arab countries, with one eye turned to recent papers and studies.

An urban drama

The first point I propose to make is that we are dealing with revolts and revolutions that are essentially urban in nature. The surrounding country areas, despite being universally very poor, seem far less involved in recent events. Is this an effect of the media? It would appear that we are witnessing – as commentators have highlighted with regard to Tunisia – a revolt that is essentially driven by young, educated city-dwellers from the lower and middle classes.

Protests and demonstrations have been essentially urban. In Tunisia, for example, we have witnessed a gradual movement of protesters towards the capital. This movement first began in small and medium-sized cities inland (cf. the previous uprising in Gafsa in 2008 (Larbi Chouikha and Vincent Geisser, 2010)). It then grew in strength by absorbing the discontent and frustrations of the coastal cities (e.g. Sfax, Hammamet) before finally culminating in the capital, yet with no reduction in intensity in the other cities. Outside Tunisia, though, eyes were mainly focused on the capital. The riots in Ettadhamen, a large, poor informal settlement in the north-west suburbs of Tunis, marked a turning point before the crystallisation and convergence of different movements in the centre of Tunis.

In Egypt, the capital has, from the outset, been the focal point of mobilisations, which would appear to be very strong in Alexandria and Suez, too. However, noticeably less was heard about cities in the Nile Delta and southern Egypt (at least in the media to which I had access). To the best of my knowledge, the protests in Yemen were also overwhelmingly urban. In Jordan, demonstrations have been concentrated in Amman, with other major cities

(such as Zarqa and Irbid) less involved. A number of observers have highlighted King Abdullah's recent visits to Bedouin villages in the Ma'an region and interpreted this as an effort to foster renewed allegiances to his regime among Jordanian tribes where urbanisation is limited or non-existent, in opposition to the growing social protests in the cities, led for the most part by Islamists.

One might nonetheless question the relevance of this opposition between town and country. In the case of Jordan, there have been occasional outbreaks of violence for over a year now in rural areas and in small outlying towns such as Ma'an – no stranger to violent protests over the last 20 years. This violence is portrayed as tribal by commentators, and is often associated with reprisals between clans. And yet, for the blogger Muhammad Nas (Black Iris of Jordan), this repeated violence can also be interpreted as a challenge to the government with regard to its ability to foster civic values, in a context marked by corruption and the impoverishment of the population. In other words, these outbreaks of protests in areas outside major cities represent not so much a politicisation as a challenge to the state. Without doubt, therefore, it would be inaccurate to interpret the current movements as a malaise that is uniquely and specifically urban – even if it is indeed in the cities where this malaise reaches its peak and produces its most prominent political effects.

Unlike social protest movements, which remained restricted to certain locations (e.g. the popular revolt in Mahalla al-Kubra in Egypt in reaction to the restructuring of the textile industry in 2007–08), the strength of these latest movements and the size of the crowds assembled have led to the occupation of city centers and, in particular, the convergence of protesters towards public spaces that represent the incumbent regimes, such as Bourguiba Avenue or, in the last few days, the Kasbah square in Tunis; or Tahrir (Liberation) Square in Cairo (see photo). This has given rise to striking images that have never before been seen in these capital cities that are normally so orderly and regimented (in the strongest sense of the term). In these capitals, we can observe a situation of great confusion that includes the contestation and degradation of symbols of power (e.g. graffiti and tags, the burning of images glorifying the regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak), scenes of violence, and fraternisation with members of the forces of order – in sum, a complete overthrow of the iconic order of these capital cities that have been so marked by cults of personality.

A failing urban economy

The factors that have triggered these protests are multiple; furthermore, it is very difficult to generalise from one country to another – or even from one city to another. Factors such as unemployment, urban living conditions, the exposure of corruption and demands for democratic freedoms all come together and are reinforced in such protests. Although the last two factors mentioned may appear to be the most important, it should be pointed out that sentiments of dissatisfaction and unhappiness have, in recent years, led to numerous eruptions of discontent and forms of resistance which, in a sense, have prefigured the current movements and perhaps prepared the ground to some extent.

The effects of the 2008 financial crisis have been different in each Arab country, but certain common features can be identified. In Tunisia, the manufacturing sector is largely export-oriented and has proved highly sensitive to the drop in European consumption; tourism has suffered from competition with other destinations, reduced spending power among Europeans, and above all a change of focus towards clientele from Eastern Europe. All these factors combined have led to reduced income for workers. In Egypt, tourism has also suffered from the effects of the crisis (however, this is not the case in Syria, where the tourism sector is booming). Across the region as a whole, migration to Europe or the Persian Gulf has slowed down, while outside investment is at a standstill (particularly investment from the Gulf in

2009–10). The participation of Middle Eastern countries in neo-liberal globalisation, which has accelerated in recent years, has had cruel consequences: the liberalisation movement and opening up to investors was very much controlled by the respective regimes, and consequently benefited above all the bourgeois classes associated with these regimes (very closely associated in the case of Tunisia – as well as other places). These economic changes were well analysed in the recent overview article entitled *Maghreb et Moyen-Orient dans la mondialisation* ("Maghreb, Middle East and Globalisation") by the geographer Bouziane Semmoud (2011) (see here). In particular, lower salaries and higher unemployment – which go hand in hand with increased inequality and the perpetuation of a small, ostentatiously wealthy elite – form a particularly fertile environment for the mobilisation of young people.

Particular attention must also be drawn to tensions in the housing market. In the days preceding the fall of Ben Ali, we saw residents of Tunis' working-class neighbourhoods welcome television cameras into their homes, revealing the considerable poverty of the inhabitants of outlying neighbourhoods. Anyone who has travelled through the suburbs of an Arab city cannot fail to have noticed the poor state of the housing there, which often does not comply with building regulations and the regularisation of which is only possible after long negotiations where residents are at the complete mercy of the authorities (whose decisions are often arbitrary), caught between corruption and social violence. Numerous works by geographers and urbanists have been clearly documenting these struggles for years, in Morocco (Iraki & Tamim, 2009), Tunisia (Chabbi, 1999), Cairo (Deboulet, 2004) and Lebanon (Fawaz & Deboulet, 2011). More recently, new tensions have emerged. The new regularisation standards for these neighbourhoods, characterised by liberal paradigms, seek to legalise the housing they contain and distribute the land titles among residents. However, according to a most interesting paper by Éric Denis dedicated to the situation in Cairo (La marchandisation des ashwayiat(s)[1] – "The Commodification of Ashwayiat(s)"), these policies have in fact led to an inflation of property prices, thus reinforcing housing difficulties. Furthermore, the development of megaprojects, and the infrastructures and facilities that serve them, has also put pressure on urban neighbourhoods that until now were occupied by the lower classes (see the contributions concerning the Arab world in Isabelle Berry-Chikhaoui, Agnès Deboulet, Laurence Roulleau-Berger, 2007). This competition for land has the effect of driving out residents and causing property prices to rise. Young people from the lower and middle classes are particularly affected, in particular because, firstly, Arab cities have little in the way of rental markets, and secondly, marriage and subsequent cohabitation as a couple are dependent on the acquisition of a dwelling (which will often be their home for life).

The stakes that these major operations involve, as well as the price inflation effects they induce, have in recent years led to many forms of resistance and protest, which have been well identified in various works (Isabelle Berry-Chikhaoui, Agnès Deboulet, Laurence Roulleau-Berger, 2007; and Olivier Legros, 2008). Indeed, one might wonder whether these protests have acted as a sort of test bed, which the current revolts have merely extended.

Another important element of the malaise affecting cities in the Arab world is without doubt transformations and reforms that have an impact on public services. These reforms cover a variety of domains, including public-service delegations, the rationalisation of management, and technical modernisation (Éric Verdeil, 2010). One of the key factors that has driven mistrust and protests with regard to these reforms is rising costs. These, in turn, can be explained by the increase in oil prices, which leads to increases not just in fuel prices – and therefore public transport fares – but also in the price of gas and diesel used for cooking and heating, as well as electricity and water. These rises in public-service costs form part of an

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[1] *Ashwayiat* literally means "haphazard" and designates illegally constructed informal settlements.

inflationist movement that also affects retail foodstuffs. Different price increases have greater or lesser effects on different social classes. The middle classes, for example, are particularly sensitive to increases in fuel prices, which restrict car mobility; however, the lower classes, who use public transport, suffer the consequences too, of course. In Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, these issues are the subject of much media coverage. Dissatisfaction with public services is often also much more basic, though: city-dwellers have to deal with electricity supply problems and power cuts (requiring costly access to other energy sources); this, together with water-supply problems (frequent shortages occur, making access to other supply sources a necessity) constitutes yet another cause of recurrent discontent.

Such dissatisfaction with public services has led to a significant – and already well-documented – level of conflict for a number of years now, much like the electricity riots in Lebanon or the protests against waste collection reforms in the major cities of Egypt, which led to tax rises that obtained results that were deemed far from satisfactory (Bénédicte Florin, 2010). Here too, I cannot help but wonder about certain points: have these occasional revolts served as precursors to, or rehearsals for, the protests and demonstrations currently under way? To attempt to answer this question, it would be interesting to look more closely at the leaders of these movements, and try to establish whether the forms of mobilisation, the means of voicing opinions, or even the negotiations with the forces of order that were implemented at the time also exist in the present situations.

One likely consequence of the current protest movements is that the reforms in question will be suspended or even cancelled. Already, the Jordanian and Syrian regimes have announced reductions in fuel prices or assistance payments for certain social categories. In Jordan, the increase in electricity prices was forcefully called into question in 2009, and the same thing happened in Lebanon. Here, the authorities face an economic and social dilemma: they have little room for manoeuvre, as these services, which are often inefficient, are still heavily subsidised and give rise to considerable debts; and yet they would appear to be one of the last remaining symbols of social equity – even if, in reality, despite the existence of "social rates", it is not the very poorest who benefit from these low rates (see, for example, the issue of drinking-water pricing in Tunisia).

Urban violence and the rebuilding of urban order

The first few days after Ben Ali fled Tunisia were marked by pillaging by "militians", apparently linked to the regime, who also terrorised the population. We then witnessed the emergence of forms of community organisation to ensure security locally, based on acquaintanceship and local social control, and lauded by many observers as proof of the "maturity of the Tunisian people". This has also been observed in Egypt since the weekend, with the "disappearance" of police from the streets.

Given the collusion of sections of the police with the regime, and the violent suppression exercised, the forces of order largely appear to have lost all legitimacy, and this state of affairs could continue throughout the whole period of protest or transition. In the coming weeks and months, in addition, the economic crisis and unemployment could worsen, in particular because of the slump in tourism and a "wait-and-see" attitude on the part of investors, leading in turn to greater social tensions. The rebuilding of urban order appears to be a major objective at the present moment in time, despite the fact Arab cities were, until now, considered relatively safe.

The Iraqi breakdown provides a somewhat extreme illustration of such processes, in particular because of the context of foreign invasion. Perhaps more relevantly, the work of Jérôme Tadié in Indonesia provides an interesting framework of analysis with regard to another such period of political violence and rebuilding of urban order (Jérôme Tadié, 2006).

By analysing the events that followed the breakdown of the New Order regime in Jakarta in the late 1990s, he has demonstrated that the political violence that occurred at the moment of the overthrow of the regime was a continuation of other forms of social violence (fights between clans, delinquency, and control of the street by criminal organisations). Faced with these outbreaks of violence, city residents organised themselves at neighbourhood level – indeed, often in symbiosis with the criminal organisations present in their area.

In Tunis, the maintenance of public order and the suppression of disorder was the responsibility of the police or intelligence services and neighbourhood branches of the party (Olivier Feneyrol, 2006 & Olivier Legros, 2007 for Tunisia). The strength of neighbourhood leaders comes not just from their party allegiances, but also from their integration at local level, often through surveillance and knowledge of the workings of the social and economic contexts, including the informal economy. In a study devoted to the Imbaba neighbourhood of Cairo, the political scientist Patrick Haenni (2005) analysed the roles of local leaders in the political structure of working-class neighbourhoods. This also brings to mind Lebanon and the militia control at neighbourhood level that resurfaced following the confrontations of 2008 (see Mona Fawaz, Ahmad Gharbieh, Mona Harb, Beirut. Mapping Security). It is very likely that, in the transition periods emerging in these two countries (as well as in other countries that have been affected), these sorts of local organisations will be called upon to play a fundamental role, probably openly, to a similar or greater extent than Islamist mobilisations (and perhaps in opposition to them).

Since January, Arab cities have entered a period of profound upheaval. The urban struggles currently under way clearly illustrate the issues at stake for the opponents to the incumbent regimes who are occupying and controlling public spaces with a view to changing the political order. These struggles are also a consequence of the profound failures not just of urban economies faced with the global economic crisis, but also of basic city functions such as housing and public services. The protests that have arisen embody a rejection of policies promoting liberalisation and/or the withdrawal of state funding, the effects of which are keenly felt by the population in terms of declining living standards. These issues will no doubt be a major topic of future political debate. On a day-to-day level, the breakdown of police order and uncertainty regarding the provision of urban security in the context of an escalating economic crisis will represent a crucial challenge for political transition and the reinvention of a new civic order.

The original article was written on 1 February 2011.

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