

The aftermath of the Arab Spring

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At the beginning of 2012, I see a world with many uncertainties. Don't read further if you want a crystal clear idea of what will happen. I am, however, reassured — after reading the book *How We Decide* — that being uncertain is actually a good thing in certain circumstances. It seems pundits who are very sure of their predictions are the ones who are most often wrong. That is certainly the case for the outlook in the Arab world. If you are sure, you do not understand.

The year 2011 certainly produced major change in the region. The immolation of a frustrated fruit and vegetable seller in Tunisia was, unfortunately, not a first. But the way the funeral procession and its confrontation with the police was captured on video, picked up in Marseilles, then sent on to al Jazeera, which put the images on television was a first. The videos were widely seen both in Tunisia and in the region. Who could have predicted this?

During the Fall of 2011, reports from the U.S. Embassy in Tunis were leaked. These reports only confirmed what everybody knew — there was widespread corruption in Tunisia. But a tipping point had been reached. Social media — Twitter, Facebook — facilitated people to organize larger and larger protests. Ben Ali decided he could not resist. Who could have predicted?

Tunisia provided the spark which ignited Egypt, then Libya, then Syria and elsewhere. Who could have predicted Gaddafi would make such outrageous statements that he made it politically impossible for the international community not to intervene. The outcomes are far from clear. Tunisia is the most hopeful, although time will tell how political Islam will play out in the country. And in Egypt, of course, the elections are also bringing victory to Islamists. Moreover the military have shown no sign that they will ever accept an elected government as the legitimate civil authority.

It is also impossible to predict the outcome in Syria. There is no sign that the government, or the protestors, will back off. It is uncertain whether the Arab League will seek action on the basis of what their observers have seen and the videos that continue to come out of the country.

Much less is said in the mainstream press about Yemen and Bahrain. The first has on-going conflict, which includes significant numbers of al Qaeda fighters, and the second remains highly unstable.

Libya has an enormous building job to do. Their good fortune is that they have a great deal of money. But one can think of other countries with revenue flowing from energy exports where the result has been huge wealth discrepancies and corruption. There is absolutely no political culture in Libya to start building democratic institutions. Indeed if politics is all about who gets what, when and how, the existing political culture in Libya (and elsewhere) is perverse.

How does one build a democracy in such a country as Libya? We know it is much more difficult than holding elections. Indeed, elections can be held too early, as we know. One project I am working on is whether social media can be used to help root democracy; I would invite readers interested to contact me at gssmith@uvic.ca. Social media certainly facilitated the revolutions. Can they do the same with democracy building and, if so, how? More exotically, might developments in neuroscience change the way we understand political development?

So far these conflicts have been largely internal. But I worry that may not remain the case. (Aspiring nuclear) Iran will not want to see the Assad regime collapse. How far would Iran go to help Syria? Might the conflict be enlarged into Lebanon? Might Assad, as a last gasp, try to attack Israel in an attempt to

change the nature of the conflict from an internal one into an Arab-Israeli confrontation? Finally, will sufficient pressure be brought to bear on China and Russia to permit further Security Council action? My suggestion is that the readers think about these things, but understand the dimensions of the unknowns and also the importance of the outcomes.