Transformation of the Middle East As a Result of the ‘Arab Spring’: Analytical Essay

The Arab Spring is also known as the ‘Arab Awakening’ has shaken the whole of the Middle East region. This dynamic social movement has challenged the essentialist-Orientalist narratives about the Arab Middle East as people of a variety of social groups marched the streets protesting against the post-colonial authoritarian rule; calling for democracy and political reform. The concept of ‘transformation’ will be contextualised in this essay to highlight whether this phenomenon was truly realised. In addition, the authoritarian regimes which relied on resilience to maintain power will be discussed too. Alongside domestic politics, this essay will address whether the Arab uprisings ‘transformed’ or had any effect on regional dynamics such as the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The Arab uprisings have challenged our perceptions of the Middle East as a region. Edward W. Said’s 1978 book called “Orientalism” argues that the way we see Arab peoples and cultures compared to that of Europe and the US is emphasized and exaggerated as a culture that is exotic, backward, and uncivilised. The Arab uprisings have challenged this Orientalist claim because it showed that the Arab people are affected by international happenings, ideas, and norms that is part of the globalization phenomenon. In this sense, the Arab Middle East is part of the global society like any other region. Amar & Prashad (2013) claim that the “political sociology of the Arab Street” has weakened all claims of Arab exceptionalism. The protests in general shared a vision for a democratic government. In order to analyze whether a ‘transformation’ took place, the concept of transformation will be analyzed as one that describes the political processes that is taking place in the Middle East. Rosza (2013) makes a distinction as she argues that countries in the region are in different stages or phases of their transformation process. For example, some states such as Egypt and Tunisia has successfully displaced their authoritarian rulers, but only few have started to institutionalise democracy. In addition, a distinction has to be made between the transformation of the regime and transformation within the regime (Rosza 2013).

The displacement of authoritarian regimes was successful is Tunisia and Egypt. Tunisia is arguably where the Arab Spring kicked off and where authoritarian rule was said to be most ‘solid’ (Pace & Cavatorta 2012). The protests here were successful because it led to the ousting of the long-time President Ben Ali in January 2011. Subsequently, the 1959 Constitution was suspended, and Ben Ali’s Constitutional Democratic Rally Party abolished. On the other hand, the Tunisian revolution has not fully been realised. This is because the hierarchies of the values and priorities of the Tunisian’s have not been met to the full extent. This was a contributing factor towards the demonstrations that erupted after the Belaid assassination in February 2013. However, the Tunisian revolution has granted the Tunisians freedom of expression. The renovation of the Tahrir Square in Cairo is a symbol of the modern Egyptian state, symbolising the turn in events in Egyptian political history.

In the case of Egypt, the three decade long authoritarian regime led by Hosni Mubarak came to an end. The transformation here was of the regime and the short-term goal of protesters realised. However, the long-term goal of the uprising demanding for political reform and democracy has yet to be realised. Alianak (2014) argues that Egypt has witnessed the re-

establishment of Mubarak-era hierarchies that emphasise stability in the country rather than long-term dreams of democratic change. Even after the ousting of Mubarak, the military powers and traditional privileges remained intact witnessed by the ability of the Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) to dissolve parliament. During the parliamentary elections held in November 2011 and January 2012, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) candidate Mohamed Morsi received 47% and Salafist candidate Al-Nour received 24% of the vote. MB candidate Morsi won the presidential elections held in May/June 2012. Nonetheless, the SCAF holds a lot of power and they dissolved parliament in June 2012 by the High Constitutional Court. The armed forces issued a constitutional declaration that stated that they uphold their legislative powers, controls over the budget, and the right to appoint the new committee to write the new Egyptian constitution. Morsi defied SCAF's order and reconvened the Parliament, however, he had to back off after the second ruling of the High Constitutional Court insisted that the results of the election were illegal. In this sense, 'the people' were not the winners because, after the coup, hundreds of people were injured, killed or imprisoned (Alianak 2014). Arguably, elements of authoritarian state-plutocrats, security, and military elements worked hard to shield Egypt's status quo from the full blunt of revolutionary unrest.

The Arab Spring has had an impact on the regional dynamics. Regional rivalries such as the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is an example that illustrates this observation. One could argue that the ongoing changes following the Arab uprising can in turn serve Iranian foreign policy interests. The Shi'ite Crescent is a framework used by Iran to fulfil its foreign policy goals. The Shia have a strong sectarian identity which means that they could be easily mobilised and politicised in a variety of contexts. For example, most Arab states are characterised by a lack of a strong national identity and sense of national unity, whilst suffering from relative weakness of traditions and institutions for liberal democracy (Cakmak, 2015). The Arab Spring may bring a type of "democracy" that may be illiberal and conductive to sectarian and ethnic identity politics which Tehran may decide to take advantage of. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran followed a foreign policy of exporting revolutionary ideology to the rest of the Arab world, targeting countries with a Shi'ite minority. The revolutionary ideas behind this believed that Western-backed Arab regimes were oppressive and corrupt. However, during the 1990s Iranian leaders subordinated ideology into national interests based on strategic considerations. Arguably, Iran has always been eager to become a dominant regional player with the ability to influence regional affairs. The ideological outlook has been an important tool in foreign policy objectives. In order to fulfil this objective, Iran has adopted a new approach on relying on the survival of Shi'ism. The country has the ability and the ambition to appeal to the Shi'a minority in the region. Thus, one could argue that it is only natural for Iran to be willing to view the Arab uprisings as an opportunity to appeal to and mobilise the Shi'a in the Middle East. Even a speaker of the Iranian parliament, Ali Larijani argued that the demands for democracy in the region was an extension of the demands raised in the Iranian Islamic Revolution and went as far to describe Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings as the "Islamic awakening" (Cakmak, 2015). Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia perceives the Shi'ite populations as a threat to the country's continued stability (Ennis & Momani 2013). The preservation of the monarchy in Saudi Arabia and its neighbouring countries such as Bahrain (with a 70% majority Shi'a population) as of paramount importance (Cakmak, 2015). Therefore, Saudi Arabia sees the revolutions and uprisings in sectarian terms and so the Arab leaders will seek to contain the uprisings, thereby aiming to expand influence within the region.

The Arab Spring has witnessed numerous states with protesters demanding for political reform and democratic change. The most successful of these protests were in Tunisia and Egypt

whereby authoritarian leaders were ousted from ultimate power. However, the full demands of the Arab uprisings have not yet been realised since democratic change will take a while to achieve and implement as witnessed in Tunisia whereby the population has won with freedom of expression. On the other hand, long-seated, traditional military forces and the political leaders who emphasise working towards stability rather than political reform towards true democracy has been observed in Egypt. In terms of the regional impact from the Arab uprisings, the regional rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia could be exacerbated as both states seek to expand influence in the region. Saudi Arabia perceives the Shi’ite threat as one that could destabilise Arab monarchies in the Gulf region. Thereby, the Arab Spring has to some extent transformed the region because it has challenged the wide perception of the Middle East as a region that is cut off from the rest of the world.