

The North Korea
Instability
Project

The Arab Spring and North Korea

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US·KOREA
INSTITUTE AT SAIS

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The Arab Spring and North Korea

I. Features of the Arab Spring

The self-immolation of Muhammad Bouazizi in Tunisia in December 2010 triggered the Arab Spring, in which the downfall of the Tunisian dictator in January 2011 became the first domino to fall and led to the subsequent ousting of strongmen from Egypt in February, Libya in August, and Yemen in the following February. The ongoing Syrian Civil War is also a spillover of Arab Spring uprisings, and Arab monarchies such as Saudi Arabia, Oman, and Bahrain also experienced large-scale protests. The unexpected revolutionary wave of the Arab Spring is characterized by the following features:

1. Unexpectedness

Even when the global order was undergoing seismic shifts at the end of the Cold War era, the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world were resilient and never collapsed against all expectations. As the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union ended, most of the autocratic regimes in Eastern Europe experienced breakdowns, but those in the Middle East remained unchanged. Even amid the second wave of democracy sweeping across some countries in Central Asia and Ukraine, the Middle East was exceptional. Observing such a phenomenon, scholars began to believe that the Arab world has a peculiar political culture incompatible with democracy.

However, at a completely unexpected point in time, the Arab Spring was abruptly set off and instantly spread across the Arab world, transforming the political landscape in the entire Middle East in a matter of a year. There had been signs of risks before 2010, such as the global financial crisis, but no one could have predicted that the death of a young man would set off the series of revolutionary movements across the region. The region has a long way to go for democracy, but the Arab Spring holds a substantial significance in that it has led to the collapse of many Arab dictatorships, paving new political paths.

2. Different Causes, Different Consequences

At first glance, the Arab Spring appears to be a series of civil revolutions that have overthrown dictatorships. However, looking into the backgrounds of such uprisings reveals disparities between each case. For example, the Egyptian and Tunisian protests were more civil revolutions, while Libya's was regional and tribal conflicts that escalated into a civil war. Also, despite similarities between the Egyptian and Tunisian cases, they had different sets of events that led

to the revolutions. In Egypt, the military authorities exerted unique strategies. As a result, the country, after twists and turns, eventually saw a return of an even stronger military authoritarian regime in the aftermath of the revolution. What happened in Yemen and Syria was more of Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. As such, the Arab Spring's chain incidents have not only had varying causes and developments but also entirely different outcomes in each country.

Therefore, it would not be appropriate to generalize the Arab Spring as a homogeneous political phenomenon for the entire Middle East. The underlying causes of conflict differed from one country to another. The varying factors of conflict had been suppressed under the authoritarian rules, where the death of a young man in Tunisia had given rise to their simultaneous outburst. Hence, comparative analyses of different causes, implications, and courses would be required for each case of the Arab Spring uprisings. Based on the insights gained from such analyses, one could predict various scenarios of possible political changes in North Korea.

3. Regime Sustainability of Arab Monarchies

The Arab Spring demolished the Arab republics only. Small and large protests and riots occurred in Gulf region monarchies and Morocco, but none of the monarchies fell. This is quite hard to understand considering that monarchical and republic systems are not much different in their totalitarian dealings even though the forms of regime are different. Presumably, monarchies have likely had a stronger concentration of power than republics, and the concentric circles of hierarchical order, including collateral royal families and aristocrats, must have served to protect the royal families.

Meanwhile, most of the Arab republics experienced military coups, which changed the government by force, and held elections, albeit perfunctory (except Libya). This indicates another vulnerability of the regimes. North Korea also claims to be a people's republic, but the structure of its regime is close to an absolute monarchy based on one-man rule. At the same time, the North has never experienced a single coup or revolution. North Korea is a de facto monarchy guarded by the strong military party.

II. Background

1. Structural Background

Even though different factors have led to political changes in some Arab countries, the Arab Spring structurally shares the following political and economic backgrounds. First, political defeatism prevailed across the Arab world. Long oppressed under dictatorships, people have developed a rampant sense of political impotence, that they cannot do anything for themselves. It was a feeling that the current unreasonable political order, as the remnants of colonial rules, cannot be changed by the power of the people. The Arab nationalism movement such as Baathism of the 1920s and Nasserism of the 1960s to 1970s all came to nothing. Since then, the Arab world has been fragmented, and political frustration has deepened.

Along with the political defeatism, the economic situation had always been a problem. Of course, there are wealthy oil-producing monarchies, but non-oil-producing Arab countries

continue to suffer from poverty. A high unemployment rate of youth, underdevelopment, corrupt government, and opaque economic outlook have been chronic issues in the region, serving as factors behind instability. The quality of life has increasingly deteriorated. To make matters worse, the global financial crisis in 2008 and the increase in international grain prices in 2010 have rattled the vulnerable Arab economies. Lacking political strength to overcome such challenges, the Arab world has been driven to the point of crisis.

2. Boosters: Internet and New Media

The internet and new media platforms have accelerated political fluctuations in the Arab world. One of the main features of the Arab community is that it is highly interested in communicating through the internet and social media. This trend has been more evident since the beginning of the 2000s. The world average number of internet users has increased four times in the past 10 years, while it has grown almost 50-fold in the Arab world in the same period. In particular, there has been more frequent exposure to YouTube videos with increased connection to an unspecified mass via social media.

This was the background when a single video and some image shots of Bouazizi setting himself on fire went viral among the youth throughout the Arab world, thereby gaining a force for resistance. On top of this, the satellite broadcaster Al Jazeera added greater momentum by broadcasting uprisings and riots on a real-time basis. Helplessly conformed to dictatorships thus far, the Arabic people were awoken by the images, videos and broadcasts that were unfolding before their eyes and took to the streets. Internet and broadcasting thus were a critical factor that facilitated the Arab Spring.

3. Situational Factor

In 2004, in the middle of the war on Iraq, the United States announced the Greater Middle East Initiative. The United States strongly believed that democratization is the fundamental solution to resolving conflicts in the troubled region. It was a belief deeply rooted in the democratic peace theory, which posits that fully democratized states never go to total war with one another. In this context, the United States first demanded changes in its allies within the Middle East. Some Arab countries such as Egypt responded by introducing a new election system through constitutional amendment. Even though Hosni Mubarak was elected as president in Egypt, it was since this point that multiple candidates could run for president. In the 2005 parliamentary elections in Egypt, members of the Muslim Brotherhood ran as independents and won 88 seats (20 percent of the total).

Above all, the 2006 legislative elections in Palestine ended with an unexpected victory of Hamas winning a parliamentary majority. Small attempts for democracy that began in some Middle East countries planted the seeds for the later Arab Spring. The US Greater Middle East Initiative was a turning point where helpless people in the region realized for the first time that they could change the politics for themselves. This situation constituted another prelude to the upcoming Arab Spring.

III. Cases and their Implications for North Korea

The five countries with experiences of political changes in the wave of the Arab Spring can be categorized by type as follows. The Yemen and Syria cases have little implications for North Korea as they are sectarian conflicts in nature. Therefore, this chapter covers only three cases of the Arab Spring: Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya.

	Tunisia	Egypt	Libya	Yemen	Syria
Nature of Political Change	Civil revolution	Civil revolution with military's survival strategy	Regional / tribal conflict	Civil revolution & sectarian conflict	Sectarian conflict
Current Situation	On path toward democracy	Return of authoritarianism	Quasi-failed state	Continuing civil war (displaying traits of proxy war)	Continuing civil war (displaying traits of international war)

1. Tunisia: The Most Desirable Model

The Arab Spring that began in Tunisia rocked the entire Middle East. As the starting point of the collapse of dictatorships in the Arab world, it holds a symbolic significance. Tunisia had been under the rule of only two presidents for 54 years since its liberation from France in 1956. One was Habib Bourguiba, dubbed as the founding father of the country, who ruled the country for 30 years. The other was Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who took power by coup in 1987 and ruled the country until stepping down in the face of the Arab Spring.

At the initial stage of the revolution in 2011, concerns were running high over the possible spread of Islamic fundamentalism as the Islamic political party, Nahda, won the general elections. It was a period of tumult. However, the country was gradually entering a phase of stability after undergoing a series of situations. Various interest groups and civil groups were united, forming a consensus for achieving democracy in Tunisia. In the 2014 October general elections and the November presidential election, the secular party Nidaa Tounes and its leader Beji Caid Essebsi gained victory, respectively, putting the country on track toward a democracy. In fostering such a process, Nahda, the former ruling party advocating Islamic principles, fully accepted the election results and joined the nation's stabilization efforts.

The positive outcome in Tunisia has attracted much attention from the international community. The Nobel Peace Prize for 2015 was awarded to the Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet, four organizations that were key to forging a pluralistic democracy in the country. Of the Arab Spring countries, Tunisia turned out to be the only one that made progress, while most of the others became a failed state or ended up experiencing civil war or the return of a military dictatorship. What is extraordinary was that the trade union, the association of lawyers, the human rights league, and the industry confederation that comprise the quartet transformed what could have been a collision among political parties into a peaceful, cooperation system. It made the only case that reveals the role of civil society.

Of course, risk factors still exist behind the overall positive-looking situation. Extremists and

their supporters are hidden across Tunisian society. Recently, signs of terrorist attacks have been detected. The international community is in a position where it should support and encourage Tunisia, almost the only success story of the Arab Spring, on its path toward a stable and democratic state.

The Tunisian case is so far the most desirable model achieved after the Arab Spring. And it is just as difficult to apply the Tunisian case to North Korea. Even though Tunisia was a tyranny, it was open to the outside world to a high degree, and the minimal level of civil society was at least in place. This was the key to maintaining political stability despite an abrupt power vacuum. Most of all, it was critical that the Islamic faction, which won the first general elections, did not enlist in extremism.

2. Egypt: Possible Case for North Korea

Mubarak's 31-year rule under martial law could not avoid the Arab Spring waves. The Egyptian people, who witnessed a relatively small country, Tunisia, oust its dictator with people power, demonstrated against the much harsher dictatorship in their country. Resistance soon crossed the threshold, making it difficult for the government authority to stop the demonstrators. The Mubarak regime fell apart.

The political fluctuations in Egypt were a typical part of the natural course of civil revolution, which was quite similar to that of Tunisia. However, what was different was the position of the military party that was the core of the governing coalition for Egypt. At the time, Mubarak was at the zenith of the military party. However, the military began to stir as Mubarak moved to transfer power to his second son, Gamal, in the early 2000s. Gamal, the secretary general of the then ruling party, was not from the military community so he was trying to disband the group of vested rights inside the army. Had the government been handed over to the younger son as the father wished, the Egyptian military party could not help but be weakened.

In such a course, a large-scale protest took place, and the Egyptian military parted from Mubarak and demanded and persuaded him to step down. It was a calculated move with the belief that it would be better to plan for the future than let Mubarak transfer power to Gamal. Such a prediction later turned out to be right on target. Muhammad Mursi's Islamic government, which came to power after Mubarak, was mired in chaos due to lack of experience. When people's vehement resistance against the government ensued, Abdel Fattah El-Sisi's military party, which was watching over the developments, took power again, claiming that it would stabilize the country and restore government authority. The Egyptian case demonstrates the features of a typical "deep state" in which even though the new regime is launched after the collapse of the old regime, the old military faction with vested rights remains a deep state in an invisible place, still exerting influence. It is a political phenomenon where shadowy old-timers are not only exercising their indirect influence but also attempting to regain power under the pretext of ensuring stability when the situation runs out of control. Since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the international community began to long for stable order amid instability and terrorism spreading throughout the Middle East. At an opportune time, a deep state can always reemerge, promoting itself as a stabilizing force and thereby gaining support from the international community. El-Sisi's government in Egypt is a good example of that.

Somehow, North Korea is a bit likely to take a similar path in case of the Kim regime's sudden collapse. This explains why it is important to observe the North Korean military party's every movement. The hermit kingdom has maintained the absolute power of the Kim family since the division of the Korean peninsula, and its military party, based on the military-first policy, is evidently a force safeguarding the regime. The Egyptian military party, which felt insecure in the process of the hereditary succession of power, sided with the people during a period of disarray and persuaded the then-president to resign. Likewise, the North Korean military could make an unexpected decision amid an abrupt change and the resulting chaos. In addition, one cannot rule out the possibility that the military would seize power as a deep state in the coming years after the collapse of the regime.

3. Libya: The Worst Case

Libya's political change was not a civil revolution. It is more of an ethnic or regional conflict. Moammar Gadhafi's 42-year rule with an iron fist collapsed as a result of regional conflict in the territory of Libya among ethnic groups divided into East and West. The hostility and conflict between Tripolitania in western Libya and Cyrenaica in eastern Libya erupted in earnest on the occasion of the Arab Spring. The tribal group in the east began a civil war with Gadhafi's ruling forces in the west, and at the initial stage the government troops were clearly predominant backed by their superior firepower. However, with the intervention of the international community, their predominance was soon reduced to inferiority. The government forces' violent repression and even air raids in the eastern stronghold city of Benghazi invited the international community's intervention under the "responsibility to protect" doctrine. The Gadhafi government's excessive confidence that it could easily repel the rebel forces brought in a bitter attack. As a result, the situation turned around and the Gadhafi government collapsed.

In the civil war, the international community conducted massive raids in Tripoli, while sparing no weapons support for rebels. In this process, a large quantity of weapons was provided to a variety of tribes. In fact, rebels were not resistance forces but a loosely united coalition of tribes. Since the collapse of the Gadhafi government, those tribes that participated in the civil war refused to return the weapons and became political forces based on military power. Consequently, a new phase for a war of all against all began, driving the country into the current crisis of being a failed state lacking a stable government. Currently, Libya has become a stronghold for the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb as well as a route of escape for sub-Saharan refugees. It is truly the worst case of the Arab Spring, and, combined with Syria's civil war, is degenerating into the most dangerous region in North Africa.

Gadhafi's green ideology was as totalitarian as North Korea's Juche ideology of self-reliance. Gadhafi maintained an extreme anti-American stance until 2006, but the situation changed as he abandoned the nuclear development program and improved relations with the West. From the perspective of North Korea, it can be viewed that Libya was hopelessly afflicted by the international community at the pretext of "responsibility to protect," simply because it gave up on weapons of mass destruction (WMD) even though it had a sound economy based on oil resources and armed with ideology. In addition, Libya clearly showed how the situation escalates into the worst of all scenarios when a one-man autocratic regime collapses, so it would be most worrying if North Korea followed in the footsteps of Libya.

IV. Conclusion: Three Points to Be Considered

1. Deep State

It is important to prevent North Korea from becoming a failed state and descending into chaos as happened in Libya. We look to the Tunisian model for North Korea in the long term, even though the country is likely to take on the Egyptian route for the time being. Currently, there is no alternative leadership, civil society, or political parties in place that can move forward with the democratic process if the Kim Jong Un regime abruptly collapsed. Against this backdrop, if North Korea has any political change, the military party's move is very critical and it is highly likely to remain in a deep state for the purpose of safeguarding its vested rights. Hence, effective responses are required.

2. WMD

Meanwhile, North Korea will reveal its commitment to being a nuclear state and make all-out efforts to be recognized as a nuclear power because it strongly believes that Gadhafi's abandonment of nuclear development is what brought an end to his regime. At the current stage, where the North has already conducted five nuclear tests, it would be hard to find a solution to the WMD issue. Therefore, comprehensive measures should be developed to manage WMDs in case of a sudden change in North Korea.

3. External Patronage

If Russia and Iran strongly advocate and support the Bashar al-Assad government of Syria despite its repeated massacres, there is little that the international community can do. From this, an analogy can be drawn between North Korea and China, in which China militarily sides with the North in the event of a crisis.

Indeed, all possibilities are open.

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