
Over four years after the uprisings began, it is not possible to write a full account of the Arab Spring. The effects of those events, from the apparent stability of Tunisia to the civil war that is spreading from Syria across the Middle East, are a moving target. Juan Cole’s book, *The New Arabs*, does not focus on any such analysis of the effects of the revolutions themselves, but rather aims to develop an understanding about what exactly led to them. Focusing on the movements in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya that resulted in regime change, Cole describes how disparate communities of North African youth were able to move from message boards to the streets and force dictators, who had seemed unassailable for years, from power.

Cole’s name for these dictators, “Republican Monarchs”, captures the positions held by Ben Ali in Tunisia, Mubarak in Egypt, and Gaddafi in Libya, all of whom tried to maintain some pretense of democracy—including phony elections and gerrymandered parliaments—while at the same time holding absolute control of political authority and preparing their children to succeed them. These Republican Monarchs had been in power for the entire lives of the titular “New Arabs”. For these youth, the primary arguments through which the dictators justified their power were no longer relevant. As Cole states early in his book: “[w]hile no state lived up to its ideals, the disjuncture between the politicians’ and school textbooks’ 1950s-style rhetoric of social welfare, nationalism, and republicanism and the sordid reality of neoliberal and nepotistic police states (often acting as enforcers for Washington and Paris) became increasing obvious to Generation Y” (p.31). But the actual nature of these Republic Monarchs is not the focus of *The New Arabs*; indeed, Cole spends little time discussing the differences between Mubarak and Ben
Ali, who were consistent allies of the West, and Gaddafi, who was not. These differences are important, especially when considering how differently Western countries reacted to the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia, compared to Libya. Instead, Cole describes how they were all similarly unprepared for the realities of a digitally-connected world. Cole, one of the earliest and most popular bloggers about Middle Eastern affairs, puts this discontinuity at the center of his narrative.

The importance of internet activism to the revolutions of 2011 should not be understated, but in Cole’s narrative there is a tendency to treat this activism as the direct cause of the revolutions rather than means by which they were able to take place. There are many Arab countries much more connected than Egypt and Tunisia, and certainly Libya, with rulers just as despotic, that saw very minimal protests during the Arab Spring. I am referring of course to the countries of the Gulf, particularly Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE. What made these countries different from the Arab countries Cole focuses on? For one thing they are significantly more wealthy; especially in Qatar and the UAE, natural resources are able to subsidize practically the entire native born population. Additionally, they are central to the United States’ geopolitical strategy in the region. While Mubarak and Ben Ali may have been powerful allies of the US, they do not have the same importance as the Gulf states in helping to maintain American hegemony. These important differences do not receive much attention in Cole’s narrative.

And, at least in Egypt, youth across the countries showed themselves not to be shackled by fiber-optic cables and employed other means of activism. In the early days of the Tahrir Square demonstrations, the Mubarak regime cut-off internet and phone services prior to Friday prayers in an attempt to stop the protesters from gaining momentum. This move backfired for the regime when scores of Egyptians–who might not otherwise have joined the protest–came to Tahrir in order to see what was happening firsthand.
The digital and real-world unity that characterized these early days of the protest progressively disappeared during the presidential and parliamentary elections following the downfall of Mohamed Morsi. While leftists and Islamists were able to come together in mutual antipathy towards Mubarak, this soon fell apart when the decision had to be made about who would rule in his absence. This growing discord manifested itself most starkly in the summer of 2013, when many of the former Tahrir protesters joined with the military to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood’s candidate Morsi. Cole also offers a controversial perspective on this revolution (some would say coup) to overthrow Morsi. He writes: “When President Morsi declared himself above the courts, forced a non-consensus constitution on the country, tried to legislate right-wing, religiously tinged laws with his rump upper house of Parliament, and pursued a vindictive and invidious policy of prosecuting critics and bringing an ever increasing number of blasphemy charges against Christian schoolteachers, the New Left turned on their erstwhile partner of convenience” (p.225). Although Morsi’s power grab shortly after his election was troubling for all these reasons, some have found it even more troubling that many activists who made so many sacrifices to end the rule of the military-man Mubarak in favor of a democracy showed a willingness to overthrow an elected leader to put in place another general, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. In this way, Cole’s interpretation tends to be too generous. Although, he is certainly critical of the military’s power grab under al-Sisi, he tends to write-off any responsibility that some activists had in providing cover for the regime’s brutal crackdown on Muslim Brotherhood members.

Libya, unlike its North African neighbors, did not have high levels of internet penetration prior to the Arab Spring, and Cole suggests that this is one of the reasons why the revolution there proceeded so differently. Despite the nation’s isolation from its neighbors, the youth still shared much of their discontents: “youth unemployment was high, the government neglected key
infrastructure, and the state was extremely repressive” (p.226-227). However, while the youth and other revolutionaries in Egypt and Tunisia were able to overthrow their Republican Monarchs on their own, Gaddafi only fell following NATO military intervention. Cole, breaking with many on the Left, argues that this intervention was necessary, writing that “[a]lthough the NATO intervention was controversial in the West, it was universally welcomed by the Libyan youth revolutionaries” (p.253).

Libya, after a brief period of seeming stability, is once again experiencing unrest, as highlighted by the horrific beheading of 21 Coptic Christian Egyptians last year. In this way, Cole’s support of NATO’s actions seems too optimistic. The lesson from this case should certainly not be that more Western meddling is needed. As the United States and other powers continue an indefinite military campaign in Iraq and Syria, it is important to remember that this situation was in large part caused by destructive interference in the first place. From the financial support given to the Free Syrian Army and other militant groups in Syria, which opened the door for the rise of ISIS, to the United States’ invasion of Iraq, which provided a perfect location for them to grow, counterexamples to any seemingly successful Western intervention are abundant. If any lesson can be drawn from the young activists in the early days of the Arab Spring, it is that Arabs are capable of overthrowing their own tyrants and charting their own course without the manipulating and often self-serving hand of the West.

But these questions about military interventions are not the focus of *The New Arabs*, the true value of which lies in its description of how the Arab Spring was able to occur. The importance of understanding the means by which (digital and otherwise) youth across diverse Arab countries were able to put an end to seemingly perpetual regimes is one that needs to be studied, not only by those interested in the politics of the Middle East, but also by activists everywhere. Although the constantly shifting political realities of much of the Arab world makes
fully understanding these movements difficult, Cole’s book as an early attempt at such a study is certainly valuable.

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