

Case study

Challenging restrictive freedom: the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring refers to the range of demonstrations, protests, riots and civil wars that spread through countries in the Middle East and North Africa after 2010. Most of the revolutions and protests were over by 2012, although the ongoing conflict in Syria is an important exception. By September 2016, the only country involved in the Arab Spring to become a democracy was Tunisia.

Numerous factors lay behind the Arab Spring: dissatisfaction with governments, dictatorships, corruption, economic decline, unemployment, inequalities in wealth, food shortages and escalating food prices. Widespread access to social media networks made the Arab Spring possible in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, whereas in Yemen and Libya people communicated through the traditional forms of media.

In Tunisia, the Arab Spring began when the street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in Sidi Bouzid in December 2010, in response to the confiscation of his wares and harassment by officials. This event sparked street protests that eventually led to the removal of President Ben Ali, after 23 years in office. Prior

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to the demonstrations there had been high unemployment, corruption, a lack of freedom of speech, poor living conditions and rising food prices. By October 2011 there were the first post-revolution elections, and in January 2014 a new constitution increased human rights and gender equality. During Tunisia's Arab Spring around 330 people were killed.

In contrast, around 40,000 people were killed in Libya's Arab Spring and over 300,000 in Syria's. Protests began in Libya in 2011, and quickly reached the capital, Tripoli. As fighting intensified between government and rebel forces, the USA, France and the UK began a bombing campaign against Libyan forces. In August, anti-government forces captured Tripoli, and in October, the deposed Libyan leader Colonel Gaddafi was killed. The Arab Spring in Syria is ongoing and has seen multi-sided armed conflict, the formation of ISIS and the use of Russian forces to support the Syrian leader President Bashar al-Assad. Thousands have fled Syria, leading to humanitarian crises in Lebanon and Jordan, and a swell of migrants seeking refuge in Europe.

Following the protest and changes associated with the Arab Spring came the so-called Arab Winter, a wave of violence, instability and economic decline. The Arab Spring has thus had mixed success. For some, there has been greater freedom compared with the restrictions before, as in Tunisia and Egypt. For others, the Arab Spring has led to a collapse of law and social order, as in Syria and Libya.

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain what has determined success in some areas but not others. They include:

- strong civil societies – countries with strong civil societies such as Tunisia were more successful than those without because they were able to transform the country after political change
- the degree of state censorship – in countries where Al Jazeera and the BBC provided widespread coverage, such as Egypt, mass violence by the government and the military was suppressed, in contrast to countries such as Libya and Syria, where there was less television reporting
- social media – countries with greater access to social media were more able to mobilize support for the protests
- support of the national military – in Egypt and Tunisia, the military supported the protesters in removing the government, whereas in Libya and Syria the military have contributed to civil war
- the mobilization of the middle class – countries with a strong, vocal middle class were more likely to see political change than countries with a weak or limited middle class.