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### An Arab spring

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## BRIEFING

### An Arab spring

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#### Introduction

The ‘imperial reach’ represents a real threat to the popular opposition movements exploding throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The dangers exist not just in the ongoing military interventions via a United Nations-authorized turned NATO-enforced No-Fly Zone in Libya, with Western powers taking an active role, but in internationally legitimated knowledge production and funding that fuel and make invisible the neoliberal agenda. The imperial reach extends throughout the region and attempts to monopolise ‘at home’, in an effort to maintain geopolitical relations of power.

For this essay I define this effort in three broad ways: Western governments and observers defining the ‘Arab Spring’ on their own terms, especially in naming responsibility for the social uprisings in one way or another that comes back to the West (or as preferences may be, the ‘Euro-Atlantic axis’), and maintaining a ‘monopoly of expertise’ (Mitchell 2002). This effort of claiming and co-opting is funnelled squarely to prop up the neoliberal agenda that has brought to the region much of what the movements have risen to reject – a revolving door between wealthy businessmen and ruling party

members, monopolistic and oligopolistic economies, rising food and housing prices, slashed wages/prices and protections for workers and farmers, dropping standards of living with weakened public welfare programmes, heightened restriction of rights and liberties (‘reign of terror’) – to name a few resulting societal ills. And the ‘assistance’ announced thus far by Western governments for democratic transitions in the region is more of the same of what has been ‘offered’ for the last three decades – pre-packaged, trickle-down prescriptions of private-sector growth.

This indeed seems like an opportune ‘time of shock’ for the further implementation of neoliberal reforms, just as such prescriptions have been more widely questioned as a result of the ongoing triple crisis (financial–climate change–food). I argue that these dangers signal a need for a collective effort among writers/commentators to ward off or resist the imperial reach of the tremendous momentum that has generated in the region for popular democracy rooted in social and economic justice.

#### **Western hypocrisy: the public face of imperialism today**

Western governments have reacted to the uprisings, revolts and revolutions in the Middle East and North Africa according to what appears to be a prescribed protocol, reserved for public responses to widespread social upheaval in the Global South, in

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countries with Western-backed unpopular and repressive governments. The protocol goes something like this:

With the US at the helm, high-level government officials urge ‘restraint on both sides’. When the revolts appear to be not so easily thwarted, they then call for reform. Tensions escalate and international media attention grows, the call for reform turns to an acknowledgement of the need for a new government.

In the case of the Barack Obama administration’s public response to the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, at this point the administration goes on the defensive, claiming to have a strong record in Egypt of defending human rights and promoting civil society. The call for a new government is not immediate; after all, publicly announcing a wish for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down just days after standing by him as a close friend and ally would be obviously disingenuous. The Obama administration instead urges Mubarak not to seek re-election, a redundancy after Mubarak had already announced that he would not run in the 2011 elections and all indications were that he was priming his son Gamal Mubarak to take his place as president.

Only when there is continued, mass support for the popular resistance do the United States and European governments begin to prepare proposals for a new government, or in the case of Libya, declare their active support of a United Nations-sanctioned No-Fly Zone. In the case of a successful uprising, when the popular opposition overthrows the ruler, Western governments cheer loudly and declare that the will of the people has been heard!

This protocol fails to veil the hypocrisy of the ‘West’s relationship with the Rest’, although not entirely. The image of Western governments as defenders and promoters of democracy and development fractures before a fumbling, reticent reaction to mass democratic movements confronting authoritarian rule.

The script – from restraint to reform to a new government to ‘yeah for democracy!’ – demonstrates much more than hypocrisy on the part of the West. Western hypocrisy is a non-starter by itself, having long been established in a post-colonial era of consistent support for tyranny overseas. Rather, it may be understood as a significant character of Western imperialism, opening a window for the observer into the workings of twenty-first-century imperial forms, especially those more subtle and less visible.

On 11 February 2011, the day that newly appointed Egyptian Vice-President Omar Suleiman publicly announces that President Mubarak has ‘stepped down’, hours later Obama’s ‘address to the Egyptian people’ is broadcast on state television, before the celebrating crowds in Tahrir Square. Obama does not just declare a joint celebration, the American people and their government celebrating alongside Egyptians, who have just kicked out their ruler who had long been embraced as a close American friend. Obama gives a lecture on democracy, teaching Egyptians what it will take to build democracy, warning them of the long road ahead.

As David Africa (2011) eloquently argues in an opinion piece in *Al Jazeera English*, the Egyptian people who are leading a popular revolution know what democracy is and how to practise it, thank you very much. Much of the commentary on Obama’s speech in the Western media focused on its eloquence, however, arguing that it was one of Obama’s better speeches. And, according to the National Broadcasting Company’s (NBC) correspondent Richard Engel, after hearing the live speech from Obama a crowd of Egyptians around him in Tahrir began to cheer for Obama and chant ‘We love America’ (*The Guardian* 2011).

When former Tunisian President Ben Ali and Egyptian President Mubarak addressed the nation in the midst of uprisings in January and February, respectively,

some were comforted by the rulers' posturing as their father, protector and guarantor, while others were infuriated by the rulers' patronising tone. One patronising address after another made people's anger grow, quickly forcing out the rulers and their immediate families. Evidently, the day that the American emperor's address to teach about democracy and the rule of law is overwhelmingly felt as patronising worldwide has not yet arrived. It is precisely because it has not that 11 February, the day of joint celebration of Western powers with the Egyptian people, marked the beginning of the 'expropriation of the Egyptian revolution by the Euro-Atlantic axis' (Africa 2011). Claims of expertise – and the vast funding apparatus to support them – come with meddling and posturing to ensure that changes in the region keep in line with a vision of the world order promulgated by the Washington Consensus.

### Claiming and co-opting

It may be argued that the West's public declarations of support of popular revolts in the region at least helped break the pervasive Middle East exceptionalism thesis. Shock and disbelief at what is happening in the region have been overwhelming among Western observers and populations of the region. A standard response to the Tunisian revolution among Egyptians before 25 January was that Egypt was not Tunisia. It can happen there, but not here! In Egypt I have heard Westerners repeating how shocking it is what happened because it was so contrary to the 'Egyptian personality' – easy-going, complacent and non-confrontational. Libyans turned revolutionaries were saying that at least in Egypt people were preparing for the revolution, unlike in Libya where no such opposition had previously been formed.

This dangerous form of cultural-turned-national exceptionalism has been mixed with state propaganda blaming the popular uprisings on foreigners. A common

response by the region's ruling regimes has been a forceful media campaign branding the growing opposition as infiltrated by foreign agents or funded by foreign powers (usually a mix of Shiite, Israeli and Western).

One of the gains made and continually in the making by popular opposition movements in the region is the shedding of the 'disbelief in ourselves' – and not just for the people of the region but for people around the world, as is evident from rising protests in China, states throughout the United States (namely, Wisconsin), Cameroon – all of which have claimed inspiration from the uprisings in the region. It is not that the exceptionalism thesis, branding Muslim majority populations and democracy as incompatible, has disappeared with the region's mass social upheaval and its successes. Rather, the work of the opposition is continually to shed this conceptual framework that limits what is possible, as ruling elites attempt to hold on to power and use fear tactics during these 'shocked' states of transition. This effort is all the more important in the face of imperial powers defining what their movements are about and where they need to go – and claiming responsibility for them. In other words, it is not the West's public support of the movements that weakens support for the Middle East exceptionalism thesis, but the democratic movements themselves.

Obama's address to the Egyptian people provides an example *par excellence* of Western claims on the popular movements in the region. In that address he attributed the success of the Egyptian revolution to the 'ingenuity and entrepreneurial spirit' of the Egyptian people. Such a weak claim, linking the revolution to entrepreneurship, makes sense when one looks at the US government's goals in Egypt – turning it into the poster child of free-market fundamentalism – and its prescriptions for a democratic transition in the country – more free-market 'solutions', especially US–Egypt business partnerships

and greater access for US businesses to the Egyptian market (these points will be highlighted below).

Not far into the Tunisian revolution did claims of the first WikiLeaks revolution begin to circulate in the English medium press. WikiLeaks had released a US State Department cable highlighting the egregious rule of the Ben Ali family, and Western observers began to refer to the revolution as the first WikiLeaks revolution when the Ali regime restricted access to WikiLeaks within Tunisia (for a response, see Dickinson 2011). Commonly Western commentators referred to the Egyptian revolution as a Facebook revolution, a claim easily refuted considering that Facebook was made inoperable for much of the 25 January uprising (for a response, see Herrera 2011).

Although WikiLeaks and Facebook have played and are playing a role in both the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, and in opposition movements throughout the region, in an effort to make sense of these ‘unpredictable’, ‘surprising’ events many explanations from the West, particularly from the United States, come back to the West.

Among neo-conservatives in the United States more ostentatious claims of responsibility surfaced than the WikiLeaks and Facebook dubs. Discussion generated on how the ‘Arab Spring’ proved that former US President George W. Bush was right about the region, claiming that his administration’s ‘policy’ in Iraq helped spring to life the democratic movements spreading across the region (e.g., Taber 2011). The reasoning is that unlike Bush’s successor and critics, the Bush administration always rejected the Middle East exceptionalism thesis as essentially racist (Carter 2011). Bush’s ‘freedom agenda’ asserted that the people of the Middle East are not ‘beyond the reach of liberty’, a direct quotation from a 2003 speech Bush delivered (Abrams 2011). Whether by direct force or not, one ‘of

the great under-reported stories of the end of the 20th century was the enormous penetration of the West’s better political ideas – democracy and individual liberty – into the Muslim consciousness’ (Gerecht 2011).

This ‘neo-conservative’ argument cannot be relegated to a marginalised American political opinion as it was mainstreamed, for example, in the *New York Times* and *Newsweek*. It is this centrifugal force of the US political right that helps bring legitimacy internationally to US claims on the region. *New York Times* op-ed columnist and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Thomas Friedmann (2011) argued that the less obvious factors igniting the Arab Spring are Obama and Google Earth, among the Western-supported and dominated Israeli democracy, the Beijing Olympics of 2008 and Palestinian Authority reforms under Prime Minister Fayyad. Friedmann claims that all factors provided inspiration to the people of the Arab world, and that these less-known reasons became obvious to him after his trip to Egypt. There are no indications that in his conversations Egyptians actually pointed in a direct or indirect way to, say, the election of an African American to the US presidency as a reason for the revolution. In fact, the voices of the people of the region and even Western scholars of the region are muted in both of these legitimated claims.

### Monopoly of expertise

The imperial discourse at the centre that claims responsibility for peripheral movements for justice cannot be separated from claims of expertise. This is claiming and co-opting: defining what the social change is about (including where it comes from) and what it needs. In the case of the 25 January Revolution in Egypt, Western powers were proclaiming expertise to help Egypt’s transition to democracy even before Mubarak left office. Catherine

Ashton (2011), High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy of the European Union, offered that Europeans have a lot of experience with democratic transitions and are willing to help. US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton visited Egypt and Tunisia also offering support for the democratic transitions in both countries. Both she and Ashton declared that they have already begun to help with more money for civil society – and that this support for civil society will grow. When Clinton outlined the assistance that the United States will offer for Tunisia's 'transition to democracy', the support resembled a neoliberal form of 'civil society'. At least in these initial stages, the US assistance package is proposed to be: (1) Microsoft will work with civil society groups to improve information and communications capacity; (2) the US Overseas Private Investment Corporation (OPIC) will support private equity firms and US–Arab business partnerships; (3) the administration is asking Congress to establish a Tunisian–American enterprise fund; and (4) business leaders and young entrepreneurs will connect through the US–North Africa Partnership for Economic Opportunity (Kaufman 2011).

This 'aid' package represents a typical cocktail of unregulated private-sector solutions that Western governments and institutions offer – essentially more business opportunities for Western private companies in the recipient country, more opportunities for already well-established businesses and businessmen of the recipient country – in the form of public–private partnerships and elite hobnobbing, in particular. This prescription for Tunisia's democracy was not based on what the Tunisian revolution calls for, but is carbon-copied from already existing US State Department/United States Agency for International Development (USAID) civil society programmes in the region. Since 2007, the US State Department and USAID joined in creating a five-year

strategic plan for the globe. The joint strategic goal framework for the Near East includes supporting democratisation through 'a reinforcing focus on building open economies', and essential to this process of democratisation is increased trade and investment, which is why they 'will continue to seek progress towards the World Trade Organization (WTO) accession for Algeria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Lebanon' (US State Department and US Agency for International Development 2007). USAID Egypt's (2004) governance and democracy programmes claim to be based primarily on the existing Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), which consists mainly of workshops and 'meet and greets' with US officials and various types of entrepreneurship trainings.

US claims of supporting democracy in the region have long been criticised on the grounds that much US aid (at least in the cases of Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan) has been designated for the military in the form of loans and military training. Billions of dollars in military aid to Egypt alone drastically fed Egypt's debt while benefiting private US military companies with lucrative contracts and mushrooming a military complex in Egypt (Chatterjee 2011; Mitchell 2002). The Egyptian military now holds large stakes in all major sectors of the economy and its generals are ruling the country politically, supposedly facilitating the transition to parliamentary elections later in 2011. As with military aid, the rest of the aid rarely even reaches Egyptian 'experts', let alone organisations and groups, as it goes to international development contractors and subcontractors (Mitchell 2002).

Since the uprisings in the region began, public criticism has been waged against the Obama administration for boasting a strong record of democracy promotion when the administration cut funding for democracy and governance programmes by more than half, with civil society programmes and non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) cut out disproportionately (Baram 2011). The administration limited NGO funding to only NGOs registered with the Egyptian government, under pressure from the Egyptian government to withdraw support from unregistered groups, including most human rights and advocacy groups, as revealed by diplomatic cables leaked to WikiLeaks.

The role of US aid in promoting a professional class of international development 'experts' and a vast military complex overseas, and in sidelining human rights and advocacy groups (in the case of Egypt), illustrates that the United States' relationship with democracy promotion in the region is weak and contradictory, at best. What such critiques fail to show is how the system of Western-led expertise, with contractors and 'meet and greets'/workshops, reinforces the bifurcated 'West knows best' and the 'underdeveloped Rest'. And of course there is nothing democratic about that modelled relationship. Further, a close examination of US aid programming in the region reveals the pervasive character of the neoliberal agenda. Among USAID's programmes – from economic growth to health to education to governance – there is a thinly veiled thread of growth-based 'development' and Western corporate-sector profiteering. The health programmes deploy expert-led capacity-building workshops, rather than essential life-saving supplies. The education programmes focus on primary education and vocational training to create a pool of semi-skilled workers in the region for the 'global market'. Economic growth equates with an export-oriented economy, with countries like Egypt exporting water-intensive and non-essential commodities (like strawberries and green beans), while importing staples (like wheat).

These are the so-called prescriptions for countries in the region to become competitive globally. There is nothing democratic about these mechanisms prescribed for and adopted in the Global South

supposedly to become a global player. Populations in authoritarian and democratic countries alike have not voted and do not vote for neoliberal 'reforms', which have been imposed (albeit welcomed and willfully implemented by the elite, benefiting classes) on governments by international banks as the only way to restructure debts and build creditworthiness.

One may argue that the claim of US-led war and occupation unleashing the Arab Spring is the flipside of the argument that promotion of the undemocratic economic order is essential to the region's democratic transition. One side involves visible coercion, the other subtle – or perhaps more fitting in Gramsci's terms – the twin mutually reinforcing hegemony of coercion and of consent.

### **A writers' collective**

There has been some timely discussion generated in select English-medium presses of the neoliberal economic order as a *raison d'être* of the Arab Spring. Bush (2011) warns of the 'buzzards of the EU, UK and US' circling in an effort to position themselves advantageously as the regional socio-political terrain shifts. He challenges the 'market economy' ideology by calling on its proponents to provide evidence that it has actually led to trickle-down growth as is claimed, and calls for a 'permanent revolution' to realise the peoples' demands. Armbrust (2011) makes the direct connection between the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia and neoliberalism, as both regimes were considered by the international community as premier examples of the 'reform agenda'. Armbrust calls on participants and commentators alike not to miss the wood for the trees by limiting the revolutions' aims to the persecution of corrupt individuals. Corruption is more than the personal wealth 'stolen', but rather is those in power and with connections enriching themselves through legalised processes of privatisation.

Armbrust further warns, rather presciently, of the dangers in a 'shocked' Egypt:

The notion that the economy is in ruins – tourists staying away, investor confidence shattered, employment in the construction sector at a standstill, many industries and businesses operating at far less than full capacity – could well be the single most dangerous rationale for imposing cosmetic reforms that leave the incestuous relation between governance and business intact.

Even worse, if the fear-provoking state-fed discourse of instability continues to gain traction in Egypt (as is evident from the outcome of the first constitutional referendum held in March), then technocrats could come into decision-making roles within the military transitional government and quicken the pace of neoliberal reforms (Armbrust 2011). As Klein (2007) argues, it is during 'shocked' states – in countries under economic crises (e.g., Mexico in the 1980s), in countries undergoing major political change (e.g., South Africa in the early 1990s) – that structural adjustments were undemocratically implemented, beginning in the mid 1970s. And now, in times of economic crises and sweeping political change, neoliberal policies may get one last push, as is evident from sweeping austerity measures throughout Europe and in US states.

At this crucial time I argue for a writers' collective, made up of scholars, students, activists, journalists and others who have gained an understanding of neoliberalism and who write in blogs, newspapers, magazines and scholarly journals. As events unfold in the Arab world and elsewhere, the collective will make a concerted effort to make visible the undemocratic policies pushed by Western governments and institutions and complying regional governments. We will focus on the direct links between two decades of the neoliberal agenda and the many societal ills that people are revolting against. We will

highlight the voices of those involved in and affected by these revolts. Forging a shared effort is all the more poignant at a time in which the international-accredited discourse and policy is vulnerable, while dangers are present with the resulting shocks.

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