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Arab Spring Countries Find Peace Is Harder Than Revolution

BEIRUT, Lebanon — In Libya, armed militias have filled a void left by a revolution that felled a dictator. In Syria, a popular uprising has morphed into a civil war that has left more than 100,000 dead and provided a haven for Islamic extremists. In Tunisia, increasingly bitter political divisions have delayed the drafting of a new constitution.

And now in Egypt, often considered the trendsetter of the Arab world, the army and security forces, after having toppled the elected Islamist president, have killed hundreds of his supporters, declared a state of emergency and worsened a deep polarization.

It is clear that the region’s old status quo, dominated by imperious rulers who fixed elections, ruled by fiat and quashed dissent, has been fundamentally damaged, if not overthrown, in the three years since the outbreak of the uprisings optimistically known as the Arab Spring. That was amply illustrated on Wednesday in Egypt, where a reversion to the repressive tactics of the past was met with deep outrage by Islamist protesters who had tasted empowerment.

What is unclear, however, is the replacement model. Most of the uprisings have devolved into bitter struggles, as a mix of political powers battle over the rules of participation, the relationship between the military and the government, the role of religion in public life and what it means to be a citizen, not a subject.

Middle East historians and analysts say that the political and economic stagnation under decades of autocratic rule that led to the uprisings also left Arab countries ill equipped to build new governments and civil society. While some of the movements achieved their initial goals, removing longtime leaders in four countries, their wider aims — democracy, dignity, human rights, social equality and economic security — now appear more distant than ever.

“The old regional order has gone, the new regional order is being drawn in blood, and it is going to take a long time,” said Sarkis Naoum, a political analyst at Lebanon’s An Nahar newspaper.

“All the people in those countries lived under similar suppression despite the differences in their regimes, so the uprisings were contagious,” Mr. Naoum said. “But nobody in Syria, Libya, Egypt or Tunisia who wanted to get rid of the regime was prepared for what came next.”

In many ways, the Arab Spring has revealed and exacerbated deep societal splits, between secularists and Islamists and between different religious sects.

“This is political polarization on steroids,” said Jeffrey Martini, a Middle East specialist at the RAND Corporation. “You’ve got both sides trying to banish each other from politics.”

In Tunisia, the birthplace of the uprisings, the moderate Islamist party now in power has been unable to build sufficient consensus to draft a new constitution, and opposition leaders have been assassinated. And in the Persian Gulf kingdom of Bahrain, overwhelming force by the ruling Sunni monarchy has failed to silence dissent by the country’s Shiite majority.

Political exclusion has also afflicted Egypt’s transition. After winning post-revolutionary elections, Mohamed Morsi, the now-deposed president, and his allies in the Muslim Brotherhood faced fierce opposition from those who accused them of perverting democracy as a way of monopolizing power.

Throughout the region, the upheavals have so far failed to address the demands of millions of ordinary citizens who had clamored for change — for jobs, food, health care and basic human dignity. If anything, their grievances have worsened.

“Most Middle East economies buffeted by the Arab Spring were already going in the wrong direction,” said Joshua M. Landis, director of the Center of Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma. Economic distress caused by swelling youth populations, joblessness, rising prices and drought, he said, had done as much to cause the uprisings as political oppression.

In many ways, he said, “the Arab Spring is the canary in the mine shaft for a broader problem — fragmented countries, too much population growth, terrible education systems, too little water — these countries are the losers.”

The current turmoil has left many Arab activists disillusioned with the movements for which they had invested tremendous effort and often risked their lives.

This is increasingly the case in Syria, where an originally peaceful pro-democratic uprising has evolved into a sectarian civil war, with extremist rebel groups that reject democracy playing an increasing role on the battlefield.

“In the beginning it was a real revolution — I was excited to work, I bought a weapon from my own pocket and sold land to buy ammunition,” said Soheil Ali, who until recently led a small rebel group in northern Syria. “Now it is completely different.”

Mr. Ali quit the fight in frustration over what he called corruption among the rebels’ nominal leaders and the tendency of some groups to stockpile arms instead of fighting to topple their common adversary, President Bashar al-Assad.

Historians note that fundamental political change anywhere can take decades or generations. The Prague Spring of 1968 may have failed, for example, but it was a catalyst for changes in Eastern Europe that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

The European revolutions of 1848, a series of popular upheavals that were the most widespread revolutionary wave in European history, affected more than 50 countries but soon collapsed under the repression of military forces loyal to royalties and aristocracies. Nonetheless, they sowed the seeds of progressive political ideas that would help shape European history for the next hundred years.

Historians said that given the repressive autocracies among Arab countries, the convulsions in Egypt and elsewhere were painful but inevitable.

“I am not writing these transitions off; I just think we’re heading into a period of extreme unrest,” said Mona Yacoubian, a senior Middle East adviser at the Stimson Center, a nonpartisan research group in Washington.

Others noted that such turmoil often obscured subtle but profound societal changes. For example, Zaid al-Ali, a constitutional expert based in Cairo, said it had now become normal for citizens of Arab Spring countries to insult their rulers — unthinkable only a few years ago.

“This dynamic of free expression, of political liberalization where now you have lots of political parties and people expressing themselves freely, this will lead us in a positive direction in the long run,” he said.

Mohammed al-Sabri, an opposition leader in Yemen, where protests pushed the longtime president Ali Abdullah Saleh from power last year, said this general sense of empowerment was the most significant accomplishment of the uprisings so far.

“The elites and the leaders in any society, whether it is revolutionary or not, can resign and say, ‘I’m done,’ ” he said. “But the people cannot resign.”

*Ben Hubbard reported from Beirut, and Rick Gladstone from New York. Hwaida Saad contributed reporting from Beirut*