



# Protest Movements and Political Change in the Arab World

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## Summary

Over the past decade, the Arab world has seen an increase in protests, strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of social protest. The uprising that started in Tunisia in late 2010 was not a completely new development, but rather a more dramatic example of the unrest common across the region, particularly in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan.

But the protest movements in the region have severe limitations. The various organizations involved—labor groups, youth organizations, bloggers, political parties, and Islamist movements—have different constituencies, demands, and organizational styles. Indeed, in some countries there has been, until recently, a deliberate decision not to coordinate and particularly to keep socioeconomic and political demands separate. This helps incumbent authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes stay in power despite the high levels of discontent in many countries.

Despite the absence of large cohesive movements, Arab regimes are right to worry about the possibility of an uprising in their countries. The underlying conditions of difficult social and economic conditions coupled with political repression, lack of political freedoms, and corruption exist everywhere. Publics in Arab countries are also right in feeling inspired by events in Tunisia and in believing that they can force change. Ultimately, however, change depends not on Tunisia's example, but on the ability of protesters to coordinate their efforts and link socioeconomic with political demands and on the governments' response—that, plus the imponderable catalyst.

*Over the last several months, researchers at the Carnegie Middle East Program and the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut have been collecting information about the growing number of protest episodes in Arab countries, particularly in North Africa and the Levant. Long before the explosion of discontent in Tunisia forced President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali out of office, it was clear that the region was seething with discontent and anger at the authoritarian regimes, although the dramatic outcome of the discontent in Tunisia was completely unexpected.*

*In light of events in Tunisia and the dominant question of whether unrest will spread through the region, we are publishing this summary of the early findings about what can broadly be defined as the “protest movement” in the Arab world. The information was collected through documentary research and through direct contacts with actors in Arab protest movements, including at a meeting convened in 2010 at the Carnegie Middle Center that brought together activists in the labor protest, youth movements, and liberal organizations in six countries across the Arab region. While our research is ongoing, the information to date provides useful insights into a phenomenon that received little attention until Tunisia exploded in massive protest.*

## **Increase in Protest**

Over the past decade, the Arab world has seen an increase in protests, strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of social protest. The uprising that started in Tunisia in late 2010 was not a completely new development, but a more dramatic example of the unrest common across the region, particularly in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan. For the most part, protest has been motivated by economic and social grievances. Because living conditions were better and the poorest segment of the population is composed of foreign workers, Gulf countries were not affected in the same way. When protest occurred, as it did in Kuwait and Bahrain, it was motivated by political rather than economic grievances.

## **Overview of Protest Movements in Key Arab States**

**Egypt**—Protest in Egypt has consisted mainly of strikes and labor sit-ins not sanctioned by the official, government-controlled labor unions and professional associations or syndicates. Egypt experienced more than 1,000 episodes from 1998 to 2004, with more than 250 social protests in 2004 alone—a 200 percent increase from 2003.<sup>1</sup> The increase in 2004 was triggered by an accelerated economic liberalization process with few social safeguards undertaken by Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif. After the 2005 elections, protest activities continued to gain momentum in number and scope. Egypt’s daily newspaper *al-Masry al-Youm* reported 222 strikes, labor sit-ins, and demonstrations in 2006<sup>2</sup> and 580 in 2007.<sup>3</sup>

In 2007, strikes even extended to public sector employees, with 55,000 real estate tax<sup>4</sup> collectors striking for weeks in Cairo to demand wage parity with other collectors. Other strikes, like those organized by the spinning and weaving workers in the Delta town of al-Mahalla al-Kubra in 2006 and 2007 even took on political undertones, with workers demanding the impeachment of members of the local trade union committee and shouting slogans questioning the legitimacy of the government.

In general, political protest gradually abated after the 2005 elections as political movements and groups recognized they were failing to create change and were not even stopping the government's backslide from the political openings of 2003–2005. At the same time, episodes of socioeconomic protest increased. 2008 witnessed over 400 instances of workers' collective action involving an estimated 300,000 to 500,000 workers.<sup>5</sup> The most important event was a massive general strike led by networks of young activists and workers' groups that took place on April 6.

The strike expanded from urban centers such as Cairo and Alexandria to other large towns such al-Mahalla al-Kubra. It also drew in an unusually broad array of formal and informal opposition groups, such as the Nasserist Karama Party (not yet legally recognized), the Wasat Party (also still unrecognized), the Egyptian Movement for Change (Kefaya), and the Lawyers' Syndicate, among others. The leading role, however, was played by state workers, the April 6 Youth movement, political bloggers, independent journalists, and university professors. Around 25,000 Mahalla workers led demonstrations that developed into riots and clashes with the security forces.<sup>6</sup> Popular opposition parties and movements, such as the liberal Wafd Party and the Muslim Brotherhood supported the strike, but did not participate actively.

Contrary to Egypt's general trend toward depoliticized protest, participants in the April 6, 2008, strike called not only for a wide array of socioeconomic reform, but for political change as well. They demanded higher wages, improved public services in the health, education, and transportation sectors, the elimination of government corruption, an end to police torture and arbitrary detainment, and the creation of a fair judiciary system. But the general strike could not be sustained for more than one day and efforts by young activists and bloggers to replicate the success on the anniversary of the event in 2009 and 2010 failed. Instead, the focus of protest returned to socioeconomic demands. Egypt witnessed approximately 1,000 strikes and other forms of industrial protest in 2009<sup>7</sup>, and 300 labor strikes in the first half of 2010.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of continuing socioeconomic protest, the government gradually shifted from repression to a policy of making targeted concessions to the protesting groups. Wages and salaries of state workers and employees were raised several times, while prices of basic foods were strictly controlled.

As the country approached the 2010 parliamentary elections, political protest increased again, attracting the energy of political parties and informal political networks. However, these actors failed in general to link their protests with the

wider socioeconomic protest scene. The only link between the two types of protest was the demand to eliminate corruption.

**Jordan**—The country experienced successive waves of protest for over twenty years, some sparked by economic conditions, others by political events. In general, however, political and economic protests are much more closely intertwined in Jordan than in Egypt.

There was widespread protest in 1989 following the introduction of economic measures, including privatization policies that affected the employees of the state sector. The Jordanian government understood that the discontent was not purely caused by economic hardship but also by political grievances, and responded by easing restrictions on political activism and allowing the opposition to participate in parliamentary elections. This resulted in an increase in the number of seats held by the Islamic Action Front. Another wave of unrest was triggered by the beginning of the second Intifada in Palestine in September 2000, with 203 marches and 73 demonstrations taking place in Jordan in first week of October alone.<sup>9</sup>

Politically motivated protest soon led to demonstrations against price hikes in fuel and food staples as well as unemployment. These mixed political-economic protests continue to take place. Until recently, demonstrations organized by professional associations and workers unions in tandem with political parties were met with little active government response. When protest started again in January 2011, in part a response to the uprising in Tunisia, however, the government responded—not by relaxing political controls, as it had done in the 1990s, but by pledging U.S. \$283 million to reduce taxes on fuel and food products like rice and sugar.<sup>10</sup> But state resources in Jordan are limited and it remains to be seen whether the government will be able to buy its way out of spreading protests with economic concessions alone.

**Morocco**—Morocco also experienced successive waves of protest, particularly in the last decade. Noticeable in some incidents was the presence of labor unions, which at times even included government-aligned ones. The high point of protest in Morocco was in 2007, when 945 protest episodes took place between January and October as labor unions, professional associations, and young activists took to the streets to voice frustration at unemployment, high prices, and poor labor standards.<sup>11</sup> Protest, however, subsided in subsequent years.

**Algeria**—Popular unrest in the late 1980s led to a change of government, followed by elections and then a military takeover to stop an Islamic victory at the polls. This led to a decade of unprecedented violence during the 1990s, with the population caught between extremely violent Islamist groups and equally violent security forces. The violence and the protest against the Algerian government in the late 1980s that led to the crisis are not the focus of this analysis; instead, this examines the socioeconomic and political protest of the postwar period.

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An unusual characteristic of economic protest in Algeria is that labor unions were more involved than in most countries, including Morocco. Even the official, government controlled Algerian General Workers Union (UGTA) participated on occasion. In 2003, for example, workers led by UGTA went on strike for two days to protest privatization policies, the erosion of workers' incomes, poor working conditions, and insufficient social security and pension schemes. Rampant unemployment (around 15 percent nationwide but far higher among young people) triggered a series of violent, spontaneous protests in 2008. Growing social tensions due to rising poverty and unemployment rates sparked riots and demonstrations in which hundreds of marginalized youths participated. One unusual outcome of the protest in Algeria was the formation of some independent labor unions, including among teachers. Even members of professional associations mobilized against economic liberalization measures introduced by the government, fearing they would lead to higher prices and inflation.

The Tunisian uprising triggered a number of large violent protests over rising prices and unemployment in different regions in Algeria. In response, the government arrested more than 1,000 protesters,<sup>12</sup> but also promised to lower food taxes and reduce the prices of sugar and oil, causing protest to subside at least temporarily.

As in Egypt, socioeconomic protest in Algeria remained largely separate from political protest. Political protest was largely limited to the activities of the Tamazight (Berber) Kabyle activists, which continued during the war and to date. The main demand of this minority group was government recognition of Tamazight language and cultural rights. The Tamazight protest movement had a direct impact on the 2002 parliamentary elections; the movement officially boycotted the elections and terrorized polling stations in the Kabyle region to prevent the local population from voting. Tamazight groups also frequently initiated large anti-government demonstrations against the regime of President Abdulaziz Bouteflika.

**Tunisia**—Before the December 2010 uprising that brought down President Ben Ali, the protest movement in Tunisia did not look significantly different from those in the rest of the region. While each country has its own mix of economic and political demands and its own forms of activism, they all fall within the same broad parameters of uncoordinated protest episodes. Tunisia was no different and no one could have predicted that it would be the first country in the region where discrete protest episodes would coalesce in a movement capable of bringing down the government. While many ad hoc explanations are being offered at this point to explain the developments, an analysis of the protest movement before December 2010 does not reveal anything unique.

As in much of the region, many of the protest incidents were based on economic grievances and often remained local and of short duration. The exception was a major incident in 2008 triggered by a local mining company's allegedly unfair recruitment policy, which soon spread. Workers and young activists participated

in spontaneous demonstrations and riots against unemployment and inflation in the southwest of the country. As the protests continued over the period of several weeks and began to attract nationwide attention—the episode came to be called the Uprising of al-Haud al-Mangami—the government responded violently and arrested and prosecuted at least 200 protesters, many of whom were later sentenced to years in prison.

Tunisia also experienced occasional political protests, including a mass demonstration during the 2005 World Summit on Information Society in the capital, Tunis. The incongruity between a summit dedicated to the issue of free flow of information and the Tunisian government's curtailment of freedom of expression triggered the protest. Other minor incidents of political protest took place in the last few years. Many consisted of individual actions by a few opposition figures and activists—hunger strikes and sit-ins defending political freedoms and civil liberties were not a rarity in Tunisia.

The most recent wave of protests began on December 17, 2010, and did not abate, forcing President Ben Ali to flee the country on January 14, 2011. The protests erupted first in poor and tribal regions in the western part of the country—the regions of Sidi Bouzid and Gafseem—in solidarity with a young man in his twenties who set himself on fire after being humiliated by local police authorities. By the end of December, the protests had spread across the country and reached Tunis, where protesters took to the streets to demand solutions to high unemployment and the rising cost of food and basic services. The government initially responded with the repressive tactics of its security apparatus. A large number of protesters was arrested and 20–30 had been killed by the time Ben Ali fled the country. Despite these repressive tactics, the protests continued to expand as activists from the labor unions, professional syndicates, young political bloggers, and journalists joined in. Social media such as Facebook and Twitter—in spite of the severe restrictions imposed on their usage by the government—helped the protest to spread. In the last few days before Ben Ali's removal, mass demonstrations took place in Tunis and the demands of the protestors changed from socioeconomic to political ones, including eliminating corruption and granting political freedoms. Eventually, the movement demanded the resignation of the president. Caught off balance, the authoritarian government of Ben Ali responded by promising concessions, including full-fledged democratization, but as the protests continued, Ben Ali was forced by the Tunisian army to leave the country and a transitional unity government was formed.

**Gulf Countries**—Citizens' protests have been a rarity in Gulf countries. The only two countries to have experienced numerous episodes are Kuwait and Bahrain and in both the motives and demands were political. In Kuwait, episodes of protest centered on political and civil rights and were driven by middle and upper class professionals and bloggers rather than by workers. In 2006, more than 4,000 young protesters loosely organized in what came to be known as the Orange Movement, succeeded in forcing the government to cut the number of electoral districts in the country from 25 to 5.<sup>13</sup> The reduction in the number of voting districts was considered by many in Kuwait as essential for



curbing vote buying and the influence of tribal loyalties in the elections—in order to get elected in large districts, the argument went, candidates would have to appeal to a broad cross section of voters and would find it difficult to buy enough votes to determine the outcome. Although the desired electoral legislation was passed and new parliamentary elections were held, however, vote buying and tribal loyalties continue to play a major role.

The women's rights movement had a long history in Kuwait, with early protests against mandatory veiling to more recent demands for full political rights. Most protests were carried out by middle and upper class women organized in civil society groups, who aimed to create social change through protest, lobbying, alliances with political actors, and campaigning for women's issues through the media. The women's rights movement finally succeeded in pushing parliament and the government to extend full political rights to women in 2009.

Although the Kuwaiti government responded positively to the demands of the Orange Movement and the women's rights movement, it turned to repressive measures as members of the Shi'i community, which constitutes around 30 percent of the population, demanded equal economic and political rights.

In Bahrain, protests over the years were mostly linked to the Shi'i–Sunni tensions that underlie the country's political and social life. In recent years, groups and movements representing the Shi'i majority of the country (which constitutes more than 60 percent of the population) protested extensively, including against the marginalization of their community by the Sunni ruling elite and the naturalization of non-Bahraini Sunnis. The Shi'a perceived the naturalization of Sunnis as a government policy to alter the country's Shi'i-Sunni ratio, making it even more difficult for Shi'a to attain equal rights. Other demonstrations demanding political freedoms and civil liberties were also organized by young Shi'i activists, political bloggers, and human rights defenders. Allegations of torture of protesters by the security services fueled the demonstrations in several incidents in the last several years, most notably between 2008 and 2010. Some of the demonstrations also turned violent and witnessed clashes with the security services.

## **Politicization of protest**

All episodes of protest have political implications, particularly in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian countries where demonstrations and even strikes are strictly controlled if not outright banned. This is particularly true of mass demonstrations but there are political dimensions even to small scale strikes, especially when they are frequent. However, there is a significant difference between protest that remains focused on social and economic grievances and is organized on a local basis, and protest that starts with these grievances but quickly escalates to political demands. The difference becomes even sharper if the leaders of the protest establish links to political parties and movements, be they legal or banned.

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The links between economic and political protest vary from country to country. In Kuwait and Bahrain, protest was always openly political. In Egypt, protest organizers have generally been careful not to cross the line into openly political activity and in many cases even refuse ties to political parties and movements. In other countries, for example in Jordan, the line between political and economic protest have been more blurred.

In Egypt, strikers have been careful to strictly focus their demands on economic grievances. Political protest movements that flourished briefly around the 2005 parliamentary elections and then again during the 2010 elections did not reach out to the groups involved in labor and economic protest. The Kefaya movement—which was behind the first wave of political protest in the run-up to the 2005 elections—was founded by intellectuals demanding political reform and had limited success mobilizing a critical mass of protesters, and found it especially difficult to reach workers. The two streams of protest converged briefly in the nationwide strikes that occurred on April 6, 2008. Ultimately, the national protest highlighted the differences in demands and motivation between the various groups, with many workers and university students holding active demonstrations while prominent opposition members sat on the sidelines.

In terms of attitudes toward the formal political process, workers and young activists in Egypt have viewed opposition political parties as untrustworthy and obsolete organizations. Protest leaders have been careful to distance collective action from political parties, strongly denying any alleged links. This distrust is in part due to the perception that parties would attempt to impose their own agenda on the protests instead of advancing the workers' and the activists' demands. Furthermore, while the Egyptian government often responds to protest based on social and economic grievances by making salary concessions or promising to increase state subsidies, it promptly puts down political protest. As a result, contacts and coordination with political parties have been extremely limited, causing workers' demands to remain primarily social and economic. One of the most telling episodes is that of the strike at al-Mahalla al Kubra in 2008. Because of its scale, the strike attracted the attention of a number of opposition parties and movements, ranging from the leftist Tagammu Party to the Muslim Brotherhood and the Kefaya Movement, all of which tried to become involved. All were rejected.

In other countries, the separation between leaders of socioeconomic protest episodes, on one side, and political parties, movements, and civil society organizations, on the other, is not as sharp as in Egypt. In Morocco, for example, protesting labor groups and political parties have often cooperated, although with limited success. At times, the intervention of political parties has simply been an attempt to co-opt workers and activists for election purposes, without supporting their demands. In a few other cases, alliances of human rights organizations, labor unions, and professional associations effectively mobilized to provide support for protesting workers and activists. The involvement of independent labor unions in support of protesting workers has been particularly important and the influence of such unions has been increasing in Morocco in the last years.

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In Jordan, there also seems to be less separation between socioeconomic and political demands, and thus among categories of protesters and strikers. For example, the National Campaign for the Defense of Bread and Democracy (DBD) launched in 2008 deliberately combined economic and political demands, as the name implies. Strategically and organizationally, it sought to build a broad network of political parties, professional associations, students' unions, and individual citizens. The DBD sees itself as a non-elitist movement trying to compensate for the shortcomings of opposition political parties and civil society organizations. Similarly, the wave of protests that erupted in December 2010 focused on poverty, high prices of basic goods, and poor social services, but also put forward major political demands, including the resignation of the government, the dissolution of parliament, and the elimination of corruption.

## **Organizations in Protest Movements**

The formation of broader alliances around episodes of protest is also hindered by the different organizational styles of labor groups, political parties and movements, political bloggers, and the youth movements. The latter have become an important part of the protest scene, as seen most dramatically in the case of Tunisian Jasmine Revolution.

### **Labor Protest**

Not surprisingly, labor protest builds on the networks of support previously created by the labor unions and the leftist movements and focuses on grassroots mobilization through face-to-face contacts. Such an approach is dictated in part by necessity, as low education and extremely low income levels among workers and state employees preclude the use of virtual organization like text messaging and social media that characterizes the organizational style of youth movements.

As a result, there are definite tensions between youth activists and protesters from labor unions and leftist movements. Activists rooted in the traditions of labor unions and leftist parties who attended the meeting at the Carnegie Middle East Center argued that the use of social media creates short-lived coalitions but not lasting structures and organizations. Such “virtual” groups, they contended, form quickly but dissipate just as rapidly. Representatives of youth movements and political bloggers, not surprisingly, did not hide the fact they considered the approach of the labor unions and leftist groups to be cumbersome, slow, and obsolete. Furthermore, some young activists pointed out that their approach to organizing avoids many of the legal and procedural limitations imposed on the protest activities of the labor unions and the leftist movements by government repression and the emergency laws.

## Leftist Movements

Leftist movements have played an important role in the protest in Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria. In Jordan, the main actors in socioeconomic protests seem to be small leftist parties. Some of these groups and movements initially protested against Jordan's peace treaty with Israel and created momentum in protest that later spread to socioeconomic activism. Such leftist parties form loosely-knit populist coalitions and organize public campaigns. The Jordan Social Leftist Movement, for example, planned and conducted nationwide demonstrations on January 14 and 21, 2011, to protest poverty, the rising prices on basic goods, and corruption. Professional associations, leftist parties—especially the Jordanian Communist party—and young activists appear to have played a particularly important role.

In Morocco, Attac Maroc, an important leftist group, helped organize protests against privatization measures starting in 2004. The Democratic Confederations of Work and the Moroccan Union for Work—two of the most important independent unions in Morocco—joined in organizing strikes in 2007 and 2008 against price increases associated with the global financial crisis and the growing poverty and unemployment rates. In Algeria, following the uprising in Tunisia, leftist movements and young activists organized a mass demonstration against corruption and price increases on January 22, 2011. Protesters also raised political demands, calling for an end of state sponsored corruption, full-fledged democratization, and the removal of President Bouteflika.

## Islamist Movements

Islamist organizations have not been major participants in the protest movement, although they appear to be getting more involved in the aftermath of the Tunisia uprising.

Some Islamist movements have joined the protests recently organized by the leftist movements, labor unions, professional associations, and young activists. The Jordanian Muslim Brotherhood, after withdrawing from the demonstration organized by the Jordan Social Leftist movement on January 14 out of fear that its presence would cause the government to outlaw the demonstrations, joined the nationwide demonstrations on January 21. The Brotherhood and its political wing, the Islamic Action Front, also took part in the sit-in organized by professional associations and some opposition parties in front of the parliament on January 16. The demands of the protesters and strikers combined the socioeconomic and the political.

The Islamic Action Front has also long been a major organizer of demonstrations and boycotts to protest the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and Israeli offensives in Lebanon and Gaza. In 2008 and 2009, the IAF held rallies in an attempt to pressure Israel to lift the blockade imposed on

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Gaza. In the past the IAF has shied away from protesting over socioeconomic issues, but recently it has started joining in socioeconomic protests and it has contributed to their politicization by raising demands such as the elimination of corruption and the resignation of the government.

In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood has been reluctant to join in socioeconomic protest. Workers and young activists have also been wary of any endorsement by the Brotherhood in light of its ongoing confrontation with the government. Starting in 2008, however, young members in the Brotherhood joined in some protest activities and the Brotherhood's leadership endorsed the activities. Members and leaders of the Brotherhood participated in the demonstrations of January 25, 2011, and along with other protestors, put forward socioeconomic and political demands.

## Youth Movements

The rise of Arab youth movements transcending the narrow demands of the typical student movements is a relatively recent phenomenon but is gaining in importance. So far, youth movements have been active as organized networks in Egypt and Jordan, and played an important though short-lived role in bringing about change in the election law in Kuwait. Most importantly, the uprising in Tunisia showed how quickly youth can mobilize even in the absence of organizational structures.

The April 6 Youth Movement in Egypt best exemplifies both the great strengths and the fundamental weakness of youth mobilization. The April 6 activists succeeded in mobilizing large numbers of people for the 2008 general strike but were never able to repeat the success. The movement sought to regroup before the 2010 elections but it had no obvious impact on the other protests or on the election. It claims to have 100,000 online members and has been lauded for creating a large and unified movement unprecedented in scope, but when it calls for protest it usually only brings out a small number of participants, indicating a rather low level of commitment among members.

In Jordan there are two active youth organizations, the National Campaign for Student Rights and the Jordanian Democratic Youth Union, supported by a broad coalition of political parties and professional associations. Both organizations try to transcend the typical demands of students by combining socioeconomic demands with national political demands, but it is unclear how effective they are in reaching out to young people outside the cities and to activists from different social classes.

So far, it appears that youth movements in the countries discussed are not solid, lasting organizations with a reliable and committed membership that can organize and plan over the long haul. Rather, they appear to be somewhat ephemeral networks, which can make up for their lack of staying power with the speed they can mobilize and the intensity of the activism when an outburst takes place.

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## **Bloggers**

A form of protest that is becoming increasingly widespread is blogging. The number of bloggers is high and growing in most Arab countries. Governments fear them and try to control the internet. Blogging is related to some extent to the youth movement as bloggers tend to be young and youth movements use blogs as a form of communication. Bloggers are effective in disseminating information, spreading the word when protests are being planned, and circulating audio-visual materials documenting the excesses of governments and their security services. Using such tactics, Egyptian bloggers were instrumental in publicizing the human rights violations and torture practices of the security services. In Tunisia, bloggers were the only source for information about the Jasmine Revolution in its first weeks. But bloggers are highly individualistic and probably cannot contribute much to the formation of enduring movements.

## **Assessing the Protest Movement**

The increasingly frequent manifestations of discontent in the Arab world preliminarily documented in this paper are an important political phenomenon that could have far reaching consequences—after Tunisia, this point is clear.

But the protest movement in the region also has severe limitations in its current state. First, it is not an organized, cohesive movement in any country, let alone through the region. Rather, in each country studied, the discontent that drives the protest is manifested in a large number of distinct episodes—strikes, demonstrations, and other forms of protests—that do not build on each other. There is no evidence at this point that efforts are underway in any country to knit the discontent into a cohesive movement. It is clear, on the other hand, that even if such effort was undertaken the possibility of success would be slim, given the differences among the groups involved in protest.

Labor groups, youth organizations and bloggers, political parties, and Islamist movements have different constituencies, demands, and organizational styles. Indeed, in some countries there has been, until recently, a deliberate attempt by various groups not to allow their agendas to converge and particularly to keep socioeconomic and political demands separate. This helps incumbent authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes stay in power despite the high levels of discontent that are apparent in many countries.

Even the individual components of the protest movement are weakly structured. There are no large labor unions to underpin and coordinate labor protest, although there are some signs that the situation may be changing in countries like Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan. Governments contribute to this state of affairs by maintaining control over labor unions and making it difficult for independent organizations to form. But there also seems to be a lack of interest on the part of the protesters to form large organizations. For example, there has been only one

attempt to form an independent labor union in Egypt—the Union of Tax Collectors in 2008—even as episodes of labor unrest have increased sharply.

It is thus unlikely that we will see in the coming years the growth of increasingly large, cohesive and well-structured protest movements capable of challenging the government by bringing together socioeconomic and political demands. As in the case of Tunisia, cohesion and convergence are more likely to develop suddenly around a catalyst. As a result, it is impossible to predict when and where fragmented protest may develop into something momentous. The explanations being offered at present of why Tunisia exploded the way it did do not offer much guidance; they are ad hoc explanations based on a single example. And in any case even catalysts are complex series of events, not single episodes—as shown tragically by the young men who set themselves on fire in Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan, Mauritania, and Saudi Arabia without triggering similar watershed moments. Whether when and how other Tunisiyas will occur is thus unpredictable.

Arab regimes, of course, are right to worry about the possibility of an uprising in their countries. The underlying conditions of difficult social and economic conditions coupled with political repression, the lack of political freedoms, and corruption exist everywhere. Publics in Arab countries that want change are also right in feeling inspired by events in Tunisia and in believing that change can happen and authoritarian rulers can be removed in spite of their mighty security services. Ultimately, however, what will determine whether change comes to other countries will not be the demonstration effect from Tunisia, but action: what protesters do to coordinate their efforts and link the socioeconomic with the political, how governments respond—that, plus the imponderable catalyst.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joel Beinin, "Underbelly of Egypt New Neoliberal Agenda," *Middle East Report*, April 5, 2008, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero040508.html>.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Struggle for Workers' Rights in Egypt," Solidarity Center Report, [http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs\\_egypt\\_wr.pdf](http://www.solidaritycenter.org/files/pubs_egypt_wr.pdf), 15.

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<sup>6</sup> "Labor Protests Politics and Workers Rights in Egypt," Event transcript, February 17, 2010, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, [http://carnegieendowment.org/files/0218\\_transcript\\_egypt\\_labor\\_protests.pdf](http://carnegieendowment.org/files/0218_transcript_egypt_labor_protests.pdf), 16.

<sup>7</sup> Jean Shaoul, "Egypt Gripped by Social Unrest," World Socialist Web Site, May 13, 2010, <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/may2010/egyp-m13.shtml>.

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<sup>9</sup> Jillian Schwedler, "More Than a Mob: the Dynamics of Political Demonstrations in Jordan," *Middle East Report*, no. 226, <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1559278>, 18.

<sup>10</sup> "Salary Hike Comes After a Day of Protest: Jordan Hikes Govt Salaries in Face of Discontent," Al Arabiya News Channel, January 21, 2011, <http://www.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/01/21/134409.html>.

<sup>11</sup> Ahmad Hamoush "A Week of Disturbances Besieges al-Fassi Government," IslamOnline.net [http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA\\_C&cid=1209357533892&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout](http://www.islamonline.net/servlet/Satellite?c=ArticleA_C&cid=1209357533892&pagename=Zone-Arabic-News/NWALayout)

<sup>12</sup> "Algeria Democracy Rally Broken Up: Several Injured as Police Disperse 300 People Who Defied a Ban and Attempted to Demonstrate in Capital," AlJazeera, January 22, 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/01/2011122105819527114.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Ann Tetreault, "Kuwait Annus Mirabilis," Middle East Report, September 17, 2006, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero090706.html>.

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