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Popular Uprising and Political Change in North Africa: A Critical Analysis of The Egyptian Revolution- 2011

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Abstract

The article critically examines popular/mass uprising that has precipitated into regime change in Egypt. This uprising, which observers around the globe dubbed the "Arab Spring" obviously took the entire world by storm because of its nature and character which evidently has escalated into violent revolutions, thus, leading to the ousting of authoritarian leaders in such Arab states like Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and the continued violent struggles in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. It is therefore the contention in this work that when there are negative increases in the socio-economic and political indicators that is, high rate of unemployment particularly among the teeming population, continued infrastructural decay, weakening economic base, poor governance, high cost of living, general discontentment and frustration among the generality of the populace thereby leading to rigorous demands for socio-economic and political reforms on the existing regime and the eventual failure of government to make the necessary reforms, there is the likelihood of the uprising reaching into a violent revolution as is currently witnessed in Egypt and many other Arab states. It is further argued that there is usually a direct relationship between popular uprising and political change especially when there are negative increases in the coefficient indicators within the state, in this case, Egypt. Thus, the relative deprivation theory as an analytical tool for understanding and explaining the current political impasse that have bewildered the Hosni Mubarak's 30 years

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regime in Egypt is adopted. This work equally recommends measures to forestall popular uprising and ensure stable political environment in the emerging democracies.

Keywords: Popular/Mass Uprising, Political Change, Arab Spring, Egyptian Revolution and Socio-Economic and Political Indicators.

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Introduction

As the "Arab Spring" continue to unleash its Tsunami political vibrations in both the Middle East and North Africa, the world was taken aback. Many of the world leaders particularly in the U.S. and Europe did not hesitate to express their worries and hopes in these areas. Thus, Obama in his speech remarked that:

There are times in the course of history when actions of ordinary citizens spark movements for change because they speak to a longing for freedom that has been building up for years... So it was in Tunisia, as that vendor's act of desperation tapped into frustration felt throughout the country. Hundreds of protesters to the streets, then thousands... Until a dictator of more than two decades finally left power (Business Day, Monday 23, May 2011:14).

Essentially the wind of change is furiously blowing across the world and it is bringing down unpopular regimes on its path. The most recent regime to cave in from the political Tsunami is the 30 years old regime of Hosni Mubarak of Egypt. Before Egypt, the authoritarian regime in Tunisia had capitulated while Libya is still boiling. Elsewhere outside Africa, Yemein, Syria and Bahrain are other Arab states where the citizens are demanding for more democratic space, economic prosperity and social reforms. Evidently, it is contended that the more there is a negative increase in the socio-economic and political indicators such as high level of unemployment among the teeming youths, lack of transparency and rule of law, lack of political participation, abuse of human right, decay in basic infrastructure, discontentment and frustration among the generality of the citizenry, there is the propensity for popular uprising to gradually gain momentum thereby leading to demands for socio-economic and political reforms; and whereby the incumbent leadership fails to acknowledge and address the yearnings of the masses, the popular uprising is bound to escalate thus leading to a violent revolution as is the case in Libya, Syria, Yemein and Bahrain where the regimes failed to acknowledge and address the aspirations of the masses. To some extent, the Egyptian situation did not escalate into a violent revolution because the Mubarak regime responded favourably to the uprising by the resignation of the leadership.

Therefore, this work on popular uprising and political change in Egypt is anchored on two basic propositions namely: -

- i. That there is a direct relationships between popular uprising and political change in Egypt
- ii. That when there is a negative increase in the socio-economic and political indicators, there is bound to be popular demand for political change.

Brief Geo-Political History of Egypt

Historically, Egypt is known to be the cradle of world civilization dating back to the Mosaic era of the Egyptian Pharaohs, Egypt, as far back as 500-400B.C had already developed both modern system of writing and documentation which in contemporary times have aroused the curiosities of scholars

particular archaeologists who have continued to probe into the medieval history of the people of Egypt in order to understand how modern scholarship emerged. Thus, Egypt has served as world centre for law, medicine, astronomy and agriculture. It is equally believed that most of the classical Greek philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, Aristotle, Pythagoras and Alexander the Great had all acquired their skills in ancient Egypt under Egyptian scholars.

According to Wikipedia, Egypt was colonized by Great Britain as part of British Empire. However, in 1919, the first Egyptian revolution occurred demanding change in British protectorate policies against Egypt. This initial popular uprising in Egypt attracted demonstrators from all walks of life in both Egypt which eventually led to the granting of Egyptian independence by Britain on 22 February 1922. This, Saad Zaghlul who was among the pioneering leaders of the 1919 Egyptian uprising became the first Egyptian Prime Minister following his return from exile in Malta.

Egypt is believed to have a population of about 80 million people of which majority of them are Moslem while others are orthodox Christians (<http://www.wikipedia.com/2011 Egyptian Revolution>). Also, according to wikipedia, Egypt shares boundary with Sudan in the South; Libya in the North West; while it shares a border with both Djibouta and Eriteria to the West and the Mediterranean Sea to the North. Cairo is the capital city while Alexandria, Suez and Mansoura are other major cities and seaports. Generally, Egypt is predominantly Arab with 90% Moslem population and 10% Coptic Christians (<http://www.wikipedia.com/2011 Egyptian Revolution>).

Egypt however, was officially named a "Republic" in June 18, 1953. However, it has been under Emergency Law continually since 1967 (with the exception of an 18-month break in 1980). Between 1981 and 2011, Egypt was ruled autocratically by Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, who came to power following the assassination of Late President Mohammed Anwar El-Sadat who is remembered for signing the Camp David, Accord with the Israeli counter part - Menakan Begin in the U.S. during the administration of former President Jimmy Carter. With the ousting of Mubarak in 2011, Ahmed Shafick is now the Prime Minister of Egypt following the resignation of Ahmed Nazif.

Genesis and Development of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution

Among the Arab States, Egypt has the largest population with about 80 million people. About 90% of Egyptian population are Muslims and most of them are anti-Israel. Mubarak's conciliatory policy towards Israel made him unpopular both in Egypt and the Arab streets far beyond the borders of Egypt. Mubarak's policies on Israel and the west were not representative of the popular opinion and sentiments within both the Islamist and secular nationalists blocs in Egypt. This disharmony created a fault line in the country's geo-politics. It is a fault line because it enhanced the potential for violent dissent against the government. Thus, the revolution that ousted Mubarak was as a result of that fault line (Saturday Sun April 16, 2011). The 2011 Egyptian revolution took place following a popular uprising that began on 25 January 2011. Thus, the uprising was mainly a campaign of non-violent civil resistance, which featured a series of demonstrations, marches, acts of civil disobedience and labour strikes. Millions of protesters from a variety of socio-economic and religious backgrounds demanded for the ousting of the regime of Egyptian President Honsi Mubarak. Despite being predominantly peaceful in nature, the revolution was not without violent clashes between security forces and protesters. Essentially, the uprising took place in Cairo, Alexandria, and in other cities in Egypt, following the Tunisian Revolution that saw the ousting of the long-time Tunisian president (Wikipedia, 2011). Three basic reasons were responsible for the end of fear and the demonstrations against the Egyptian regime; youth bulge, communication technology and

corruption. Due to the demographic transition and the decreasing fertility rates in Egypt in the last few decades, Egypt witnesses a marked youth bulge, a phase in which the percentage of youth increases significantly compared to other age groups. This youth bulge as a result of uninvestment in concrete policies related to the labour market and political openness as well as political institutions became a catalyst for instability which resulted to the popular uprising in Egypt. Secondly, migration to virtual reality among Egyptian youth was the alternative of the lack of real participation in political life due to seizing political life by Mubarak's regime. Despite the socio-economic drawback of Mubarak's regime, the communication technology sector in Egypt witnessed a large boom in the last few decades. Communication technology was the soft tool that witnessed the formation of public opinion against Mubarak's regime. Finally, Mubarak's regime was a symbol of corruption such as lack of free elections, emergency law for the duration of his presidency, powerful businessmen in the National Democracy Party and in the People's Assembly, the ambition of Gamal Mubarak to replace his father, state control of resources, and the widespread of slum areas and poverty (Ayman Zohry, 2011).

Grievances of Egyptian protesters were focused on legal and political issues including police brutality, state of emergency laws, lack of free elections and freedom of speech, uncontrollable corruption, and economic issues including high unemployment, food price inflation, and low minimum wages. The primary demands from protest organizers were the end of the Hosni Mubarak regime and the end of emergency law; freedom, justice, a responsive non-military government, and a say in the management of Egypt's resources. Strikes by labour unions added to the pressure on government officials. There were up to 840 deaths reported and over 6,000 were injured. The capital city of Cairo was described as "a war zone", and the port city of Suez was the scene of frequent violent clashes. International response to the protests was initially mixed, though most called for peaceful actions on both sides and moves toward reform. Most western governments expressed concern about the situation. Thus, many governments issued travel advisories and made attempts to evacuate their citizens from Egypt. The Egyptian Revolution, along with Tunisian events, has influenced demonstrations in other Arab countries including Yemen, Bahrain, Jordan, Syria and Libya (Wikipedia, 2011).

International reactions have varied with most Western States arguing that peaceful protests should continue but also expressing concern for the stability of the country and the region. The European Union's Foreign Affairs Chief issued a statement noting that:

I also reiterate my call upon the Egyptian authorities to urgently establish a constructive and peaceful way to respond to the legitimate aspirations of Egyptian citizens for democratic and socio-economic reforms. The United States, Britain, France, Germany and others issued similar statements calling for reforms and an end to violence against peaceful protesters. NGOs also expressed concern about the protest and the ensuing heavy-handed state response. Amnesty International described attempts to discourage protests as "unacceptable" (Wikipedia, 2011).

Methodological Perspective

The theory of relative deprivation was espoused by American scholars (Gurr, 1970) and has gained wide recognition in understanding and explaining agitation and mass uprisings among the populace. Relative deprivation is viewed as stakeholders recognition of inconsistency between, their value desire and their environment manifest value potentialities. Value prospects are the goods and conditions of life to which people suppose they are fairly entitled. The determinants of value potentialities appeared in the social

and physical surroundings; they are the stipulations that decides people's known possibilities of obtaining or retaining the norms they justifiably desire to achieve. Gurr (1970) views deprivation as primarily psychological. Thus, if such sense of deprivation is confined to an individual, it invariably leads to crime. But when deprivation becomes a collective transformation of a region, community or as the case of Egypt, it assumed the form of collective activities. The deprivation of basic human wants by the Mubarak's regime evidently, led to frustration, agitation, discontentment and disillusionment among the generalities of the Egyptian populace thus, the political reformation.

Therefore, once there is negative increase in the socio-economic and political indicators such as unemployment, high level of illiteracy, high inflation, discontentment, political apathy, poor governance, lack of freedom and violation of human rights amongst others, there will be the tendency for popular uprising leading to demands on the existing leadership for reforms which failure to address will possibly lead to anarchy or violent social movement as is the case in Egypt and many other Arab states.

Analysis of the Egyptian Revolution

The protests in Egypt were not centered around religion-based politic, but nationalism and a broad-based social consciousness. Before the mass uprising, the most organized and prominent opposition movements throughout the Arab world usually came from Islamist organizations that relied on a conviction of their faith, where members were motivated and ready to sacrifice. However, secular forces emerged from the revolution touting principles that religious groups shared with them: freedom, social justice, and dignity. Islamist organizations also emerged with greater freedom to operate. Although, the cooperative, multi-denominational revolution itself was no guarantee that partisan politics would not re-emerge in its wake, its success nonetheless represented a change from the intellectual stagnation created by decades of repression which simply pitted modernity and Islam against as conflicting and incompatible. Islamists and secularists both have been faced with new opportunities for dialogue and discourse, on matters such as the role of Islam and Sharia in society and freedom of speech, as well as the impact of secularism on a predominantly Muslim population (Wikipedia,2011).

The revolution that ousted Mubarak and was as a result of Mubarak's policies on Israel and the West which are not representative of the popular opinion and sentiments within both the Islamist and secular nationalist blocs in Egypt. This disharmony created a fault line in the country's geopolitics. The various blocs would have preferred an Egyptian state that is more Islamic and supportive of the Palestinian people in the spirit of Pan-Arab nationalism. Frayed nerves were calmed in Tel Aviv and the Western capitals when Egypt's top military brass that took over from Mubarak assured the international community of its commitment to every international treaty and accord signed by Egypt, including Camp David Accord. An Egypt ruled by Islamist 'may' cut off ties with the US (United States), but will certainly sever diplomatic relations with Israel and annul Camp David Accord. Such a move may disrupt the Palestinian-Israel peace initiative and escalate Arab-Israeli violence. The same regime may likely revive the Egypt-Syria alliance that threatened Israel's existence in the 1950s and 1960s when Abdel Nasser ruled over Egypt. Such a regime may perhaps create a new alliance with Iran. These scenarios will herald United States and Israel's worst nightmare. Even a democratically elected secular regime voted in by the masses may not be as friendly to the US and Israel as Mubarak's government if it wishes to remain popular. The fear of the West and Israel hinges on the following: First, the rise to power of a conservative Islamist and anti-west movement such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB), which is currently the largest and best organized political opposition group in Egypt. In fact, it is believed to be the largest political opposition group in many Arab states. Second, Mubarak is reckoned by the West as a strong leader who has been a

stabilizing factor in Egypt's potentially volatile society. They believe his strong leadership protected their economic interests in the Suez Canal, which is an international trade route. The economic importance of the Suez Canal has made Egypt economic hotspot since its opening in November 1869. Finally, from an absolutist perspective in which there is some logical truth in it democratic governments are seen to be a weak form of government in volatile societies because ideally, democracy is tolerant of dissent or opposition (Saturday Sun, April 16, 2011).

Despite the optimism surrounding the revolution, several commentators have expressed concerns about the risk of increased power and influence for Islamist forces in the country and the region at large, as well as the difficulties of integrating the different groups, ideologies and visions for the country among the population. Journalist Caroline Glick argued that the Egyptian revolution portends a rise in religious radicalism and support for terrorism, citing a 2010 Pew Opinion Poll which found that Egyptians supported Islamists over modernizers by a ratio of over 2 to 1. Since the revolution, Islamist parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood have shown unprecedented strength in the new and more democratic landscape, taking leading roles in constitutional changes, voter mobilization and protests. This was a noted concern among the secular and youth movements, which wanted elections to be held later rather than sooner, so that they might catch up with the already well-organized groups. Elections are to be held in September 2011 and it is unclear which group or approach will prevail (Wikipedia, 2011).

When the strong winds of change blow across a country or an area of the world, one cannot know for certain whether they will lead to a more prosperous and stable society or not. Many groups in Egypt are working for political change—progressive and regressive, transparent and dubious and the stakes are high. While the army has benefited most from the revolution, it is by no means clear which direction the Higher Army Council is taking the country. What has become patently obvious, however, is that the council is in the process of consolidating its already formidable positions as the unrivalled arbiter of political change in Egypt. To that end, the council assigned a group of constitutional scholars and jurors to amend six of the most contentious items in the constitution in order to put the proposed changes to a referendum by the Egyptian people. A look at the most prominent discourse making the newspapers and airways during the recent situations indicates that the army (or parts of it) and elements of the old regime will resist attempts at meaningful democratic reforms. While paying lip service to the youth, the revolution and the martyrs, the ubiquitous appeal in all the local media has been to urge Egyptians to get back to work in order to get the economy back on track. The assumption being that political reform can be properly instituted only under the conditions of tranquility. Whether or not those advocating this position are part of the previous regime, it feeds into a kind of rumour-mongering and argumentation that is called the counter-revolution (Jadaliyya, 2011).

The counter-revolution is used all the media at their disposal to rewrite the past by painting a nostalgic picture of the Mubarak era while simultaneously making all the accusation against his security apparatus and cronies appear unreal and unbelievable. Elements of the counter-revolution are trying to appropriate the revolution. The High Army Council took some steps to keep the trust of most Egyptians, like the arrest of several former prominent figures and profiteers of the Mubarak regime, including Ahmed Ezz, the General Secretary of the UDP and the largest steel magnate in the Middle East; Zeheir Gerrana, former Minister of Tourism; Ahmed Maghrabi, former Minister of Housing and Habib Al-Adly, the despised former Minister of the interior. In the view of Jadaliyya (2011), the arrests of other prominent figures can also be seen as a mere palliative: the High Army Council and elements of the former regime

are making cosmetic changes, sacrificing some of the most corrupt and hated figures in order to continue with business as usual.

It is difficult to predict how much the Egyptian revolution will benefit the people of the country. There are positive signs of change: workers are in the process of forming the first independent labour union in the country, and labour in several sectors and cities have succeeded-even after the fait threat of force in having their demands for better wages, conditions and new management met. Finally, the wide participation and the significant contributions by Egyptian women to the protests have been attributed to the fact that many, especially younger women are better educated than previous generations, representing more than half of Egyptian University students. This has been an empowering factor for women, who have become more present and active publicly in recent years. The advent of social media has also helped provide tools for women to become protest leaders (Jadaliyya, 2011).

Lessons for African States

The Egyptian revolution is "a religion-free movement", Egyptians dare for a democratic and secular country. Theological movements will not replace Mubarak's regime, this is the message that should be conveyed to the world and Africa in particular. Egyptians have proved that even in today's world, revolution remains the only universal language used by oppressed people to correct the ills of their society. Another lesson rests in the words of John F. Kennedy when he said that "those who make peaceful revolutions impossible make violent revolutions inevitable". The Egyptian revolution has been peaceful in the sense that the number of deaths has been very minimal, considering the number of people marching in the streets of Egypt for change.

Furthermore, what happened in Egypt is a clear lesson to the West and also sounds a clear but unequivocal warning to sit-tight African leaders that their days are numbered. As for the West, it is a lesson that they have to grind their teeth because the Egyptian revolution has caught them in the dilemma of their own logic. When you implicitly support autocratic government for the clear reason of protecting your interest at the behest of the people sovereign in their country, then what you gain is the Egyptian revolution. As for the sit-tight African leaders, although it is not clear whether other Africans like the Egyptians have the orientation and the consciousness displayed by the Egyptians in the Egyptian revolution, the truth however is that it is unpredictable when a revolution would be ripe like this. Nevertheless, if the Northern African people most of whom have been dominated and controlled with religion can stage such protest to oust their President, then what happened in Egypt is capable of happening elsewhere. There is certainly a limit to how long the people can be oppressed. The scenario in Egypt and Tunisia therefore serves a serious warning for sit-tight and inefficient and ineffective leaders and perpetrators in power (Abiodun, F. 2011).

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