The Causes of Revolutions: Libyan and Syrian Case

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Abstract

Political, cultural, and economic stability of a nation-state is the most important aspect that a government can give to its citizens. As such, governments strive to ensure that they rule in a manner that satisfies the socio-economic and political needs of the citizens to an acceptable degree. However, there are cases where the citizens feel that they are not being governed fairly

and justly. When this happens, citizens may start calling for changes in the governance system of their respective countries from the current form of governance to the desired one. When citizens start calling for a different political system, existing governments are bound to resist such a pressure in a bid to preserve power. The citizens are sometimes forced to use violence to achieve their political demands and defy riot police. A political revolution, therefore, takes place when the citizens of a given country start advocating for changes in the political system but the ruling class rejects such calls. What caused the Libyan and Syrian revolutions of 2011? Research shows that those were made up of myriad of factors including political (dictatorial governments), economic (class inequalities), and social (massive abuse of human rights) issues.

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The Arab uprising, as it has come to be known, began in 2010 and continued throughout 2011 affecting a number of countries across the northern part of Africa and the Middle East. Among the countries affected by the uprising were Tunisia, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Egypt, and Algeria. The aforementioned countries all experienced wide spread civil unrest accompanied by subsequent violence perpetrated by disgruntled statesmen. According to Bhardwaj (2012), as the waves of revolution began sweeping over the region, dictatorial regimes that were historically considered invincible started crumbling under massive pressure caused by over-arching civil

unrest. As such, it is clear that despite how long an authoritarian regime may last, there will come a time when the citizens decide to take back power from the dictators and establish a more suitable form of governance. The process of citizens deciding to oust an incumbent government and the actual ousting and subsequent replacement of the said rulers is what is this study terms as a revolution. So what were the probable causes of the Libyan and Syrian revolutions? Various theorists, scholars, and political analysts have come up with many explanations of the causes of the respective revolutions. An exhaustive appraisal of appropriate literature on the origins of the revolutions in Libya and Syria has led to the formulation of variables to explain this occurrence. The independent variables in these cases include political oppression (Stigall, 2014; Jamoul, 2012), economic inequalities (Asani & Daniele 2012; Douglas et. al 2014; Philipp 2013), social harassment, and human rights abuse (Philipp, 2013; Bhardwaj, 2012; Goldstein, 2011). Two hypotheses concerning the causes of the Syrian and Libyan revolutions have been deduced from these variables:

Hypothesis 1: Revolutions often occur when the ruling class of a given state uses political power to subjugate the citizens.

Hypothesis 2: Revolutions are most likely to occur when the ruling class is involved in widespread abuse of human rights.

For the purpose of this study, the revolutions in Syria and Libya are used as the dependent variables. A revolution can be termed as any process that involves activities geared towards changing the socio-economic and political life of a given society (Jamoul, 2012). Quoting Hanna Arendt, Stigall (2014) writes, "Only where change occurs in the sense of a new beginning, where violence is used to constitute an altogether different form of government, to

bring about the formation of a new body politic, where the liberation from oppression aims at least at the constitution of freedom can we speak of revolution."

Historically, Libya and Syria were colonized by different European countries. Mentioning the end of colonization period, Douglas et. al (2014) write that "officers with strong anti-colonial sentiments gradually took over command in the military…and when Arab states won independence with military overthrows, authoritarian regimes with socialist ideals came to power." These totalitarian rulers ensured that any people or groups who dared to challenge their ideals were not given the political platform to do so. Bhardwaj (2012) writes that "Syria's sultanic system of control, characterized by leader monopoly of governmental and political processes, is similar to Libya's…and strongly eliminated popular engagement in the political process and transition of power."

The prevalent political systems in the two countries prior to the revolution meant that the people of Libya and those of Syria were stuck with the same political leaders for decades. For example, Libya's Muammar Gaddafi have stayed in power for 40 years (Asani & Daniele, 2012). During Gaddafi's rule, Libyan political and economic situation can be described like that "while bestowed with large welfare programs to buy loyalty, drove Libya into economic distress and failed to reap the benefits of oil endowments." Although al-Assad had only been in power for 10 years, he had taken over from his father, who had ruled Syria for many years, meaning that people were angry because leadership turned out to be hereditary. According to Philipp (2013) by the time the revolution took place, political exclusion in Libya stood at 17.23 points, meaning that the citizens did not have even basic political rights.

The only way for Libya to end the political oppression practiced by the regime was through the ouster of the country's leader. As Stigall (2014) states, "Libyan rebels, with the

assistance of NATO countries, ousted Muammar Gaddafi." The ouster of Gaddafi marked a new phase for the people of Libya as they saw an opportunity to replace all the government officials who had worked for Gaddafi's government. The people of Syria also sought to remove al-Assad from power, considering that "on the outskirts of Damascus, Crisis Group heard people openly evoking the need to put an end to the regime." People started to openly rebel against the officials of the regime by, for example, refusing to be bullying and extortion by civil servants, actions which had previously been tolerated. Although the Syrians did not overthrow Bashar al-Assad and the country still remains a monarchy, al-Assad's government was forced to institute a number of political reforms in an effort to try and quell the revolution. For example, writes that al-Assad's regime has instituted better foreign relations policies and set up measures to reduce corruption by government officials.

The case of abuse of human rights being the causative factor in the Syrian and Libyan revolutions is discussed by Bhardwaj (2012) who writes that it was a major factor in the revolution. Although Bhardwarj (2012) writes that Gaddafi denied any human rights abuses in his regime, report by the NHRC show that Gaddafi's regime was responsible for violating the rights of people in the country. Gaddafi's evils extended beyond Libya, considering Steinberg (2012) "Gaddafi was linked to major terror attacks, including planting an explosive on pan am flight 104, which exploded over Lockerbie, Scotland on December 21, 1988, murdering 270 people." As a result of rampant abuses of the rights of people by the regime, regular demonstrations had been held by civil groups in Libya some years before the revolution. Goldstein (2011) states that "in Libya, families of the 1996 mass killings in Abu Salim prison became the first group in the country to demonstrate regularly in the public after a North

Benghazi court in 2008 ordered the government to reveal the fate of Abu Salim prisoners who had "disappeared."

The Syrian government was also cited as being a key perpetrator of abuse of human rights, a factor which might have caused the revolution. According to the international crisis group (2011), the al-Assad regime was responsible for the massive abuse of human rights in the period prior to and during the revolution. However, as Steinberg (2012) writes, a report by the HRW conducted in 2010 only produced a 35-page document concerning how the regime abused human rights, pointing to a lack of sufficient evidence to support the claim of rampant abuse. In Syria, Goldstein (2011) writes that small groups of Syrians had begun demanding for basic rights during the "Damascus Spring", but most of them had been imprisoned by the al-Assad government.

Conclusion

The evidence provided supports the hypothesis that revolutions are most likely to occur when the ruling class is involved in widespread abuse of human rights. Examples provided show how the respective governments abused the rights of people in their countries and even beyond, these examples are not convincing enough to show that human rights abuses led to the revolutions. Hypothesis on the role of political inequalities and oppression in causing the Libyan and Syrian revolutions is well supported by relevant literature as well. Gaddafi's and al-Assad's regimes were politically intolerant in that they did not allow the citizens of their respective countries to participate in political decisions. The regimes ensured that the citizens were deprived of basic political rights such as fair elections and freedom of speech, as well as access to high-level government jobs. In addition, the leaders, turned their posts into hereditary ones. As a result of such high level political exclusion, the people of Libya revolted causing the ouster and death

of Muammar Gaddafi. In Syria, al-Assad's government is still in place although it was forced to

make various changes to appease the masses.

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