

The Arab Spring

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Egyptians wave the national flag in Cairo's Tahrir Square during a rally marking the anniversary of the 2011 Arab Spring uprising on January 25, 2014. AFP Photo/Virginie Nguyen Hoang

The Arab Spring refers to the wave of pro-democracy protests that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011. It challenged some of the region's long-standing authoritarian governments. Demonstrators expressing political and economic grievances faced violent crackdowns.

In January and February 2011, protests in Tunisia and Egypt succeeded in a matter of weeks in toppling two regimes thought to be among the region's most stable.

The Arab Spring affected a number of countries differently. Map: Newsela Staff.

Tunisia

The first demonstrations took place in central Tunisia in December 2010. They started after a 26-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself alive to protest his treatment by local officials. A protest movement, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution" in the media, quickly spread through the country.

The Tunisian government attempted to end the unrest by using violence against street demonstrations and by offering political and economic concessions. However, protests soon overwhelmed the country's security forces, compelling President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali to step down and flee the country in January 2011. In October 2011, Tunisians participated in a free election to choose members of a council who would draft a new constitution. A democratically chosen president and prime minister took office in December 2011.

Egypt

Massive protests broke out in late January 2011, only days after Ben Ali fled Tunisia. The Egyptian government tried and failed to control protests by offering concessions while cracking down violently against protesters. A turning point came when the Egyptian army announced that it would refuse to use force against protesters. President Ḥosnī Mubārak left office on February 11 after nearly 30 years, giving power over to a council of senior military officers.

A period of euphoria followed, and the new military administration enjoyed high public approval because of the decisive role the military had played in ending Mubārak's rule. However, optimism was dampened when the new administration appeared hesitant to begin a full transfer of power to an elected government and when military and security forces resumed the use of violence against protesters. Confrontations between protesters and security forces became frequent occurrences. Still, parliamentary elections proceeded as scheduled. The newly elected People's Assembly held its inaugural session in late January 2012.

The aftermath of the uprisings is still unfolding. After a group called the Muslim Brotherhood won elections in 2012, many in the country were hopeful. Newly-elected President Mohamed Morsi appointed a former military officer, Abdel Fatah al-Sissi, as his defense minister. But one year into Morsi's presidency, another round of huge protests broke out. After protesters demanded that Morsi step down, al-Sisi led a coup d'etat to remove Morsi from office, taking over the presidency himself.

Others around the Middle East were inspired by the protesters' rapid success in Tunisia and what initially seemed like a success in Egypt. Protest movements took hold in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria in late January, February, and March 2011. In these countries, however, outpourings of popular discontent led to long bloody struggles between opposition groups and ruling governments.

Yemen

The first protests appeared in late January 2011. Even some tribal and military leaders aligned themselves with the pro-democracy protesters. They called for President 'Alī 'Abd Allāh Ṣāliḥ to step down. Negotiations failed, and there were clashes in the largest city,

Sanaa. Ṣālīḥ left Yemen in June to receive medical treatment after he was injured in a bomb attack, but he returned to the country unexpectedly four months later. In November 2011, Ṣālīḥ signed an agreement calling for a transfer of power to the vice president, ‘Abd Rabbuh Maṣṣūr Hadī. Hadī took over governing responsibility immediately and formally assumed the presidency in February 2012. This was after a presidential election where he was the only candidate on the ballot.

However, political transition has not gone smoothly. Fighting soon broke out between a number of factions, including Houthi rebels and fighters linked to the terrorist group Al Qaeda. Houthi rebels are supported by Iran and gained notoriety by discussing political and religious issues in Yemeni media. Hadi resigned in 2015 and eventually fled to Saudi Arabia. Houthi rebels declared that they would control the government, while Saudi Arabia began airstrikes against the Houthis. The Houthis have aligned with people loyal to former President Saleh. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is trying to restore Hadi as Yemen's leader.

Even before fighting broke out, around half of the people in Yemen were living in poverty. Early in 2017, millions risked starvation as the fighting put a halt on food imports into the country. Should the fighting continue, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen could very well spiral into one of the worst in the world.

Bahrain

Mass protests demanding reforms erupted in mid-February 2011. They were led by Bahraini human rights activists and members of Bahrain's marginalized Shiite majority. Protests were violently suppressed by Bahraini security forces. The security forces in Bahrain were aided by a force of around 1,500 soldiers from the nearby countries of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

By the end of March, the mass protest movement had been stifled. After the protests, dozens of accused protest leaders were imprisoned, hundreds of Shiite workers suspected of supporting the protests were fired, and dozens of Shiite mosques were demolished by the government. In November 2011, an independent investigation into the uprising concluded that the government had used excessive force and torture against protesters. The government vowed to act on the recommendations for reform included in the report.

Libya

Protests against the regime of Muammar al-Qaddafi in mid-February 2011 quickly escalated into an armed revolt. When the rebel forces appeared to be on the verge of defeat in March, an international coalition launched a campaign of air strikes targeting Qaddafi's forces. The coalition was led by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the military alliance between Europe and North America.

Qaddafi was able to cling to power for several more months, but he was forced from power in August 2011 after rebel forces took control of the capital, Tripoli. He evaded capture for several weeks. However, Qaddafi was killed in October 2011 as rebel forces took control of the city.

After Qaddafi's death, an internationally recognized temporary government, known the Transitional National Council (TNC), took power. The TNC struggled to restart the Libyan economy and establish functional institutions of government. They also had difficulty controlling the many independent militias that had participated in the rebellion against Qaddafi.

Syria

Protests in Syria calling for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad broke out in mid-March 2011. They spread through the country. The Assad regime responded with a brutal crackdown against protesters. This was condemned by international leaders and human rights advocates. A leadership council for the Syrian opposition formed in Istanbul in August, and opposition militias began to launch attacks on government forces. Still, Assad's hold on power appeared strong, as he was able to retain the support of critical military units composed largely of members of Syria's Alawite minority, to which Assad also belonged.

Meanwhile, divisions in the international community made it unlikely that international military intervention, like the NATO intervention in Libya, would be possible in Syria. Russia and China vowed to oppose any measure that would lead to foreign intervention in Syria or Assad's removal from power.

Effects of the Arab Spring

The effects of the Arab Spring movement were felt elsewhere throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the countries in the region experienced at least minor pro-democracy protests. In Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, rulers offered a variety of concessions in order to head off the spread of protest movements in their countries. They ranged from the dismissal of unpopular officials to constitutional changes.

Quiz

- 1 This article is organized by describing the Arab Spring in different countries.
- What aspects of the Arab Spring are NOT fully addressed due to this organizational structure?
- (A) why protesters in each country wanted to change how their countries were governed
 - (B) what similarities and differences were experienced by the various countries involved
 - (C) how other countries around the world reacted to the Arab Spring and were affected by it
 - (D) who the main groups were in each country and how they were involved

- 2 Read the selections from the article.

1. *In October 2011, Tunisians participated in a free election to choose members of a council who would draft a new constitution. A democratically chosen president and prime minister took office in December 2011.*
2. *The TNC struggled to restart the Libyan economy and establish functional institutions of government. They also had difficulty controlling the many independent militias that had participated in the rebellion against Qaddafi.*

How does the relationship between these two selections develop the main idea of the article?

- (A) 1 gives an example of the problems the protesters were angry about, while 2 gives an example of a the main struggles faced by the new governments.
- (B) 1 gives one example of many governments that were able to establish a democracy after the Arab Spring, while 2 shows how protests often resulted in violence and war.
- (C) 1 shows the only example of a successful transition to democracy after the Arab Spring, while 2 gives an example of one of the governments that struggled to recover from the Arab Spring.
- (D) 1 shows the only example of a successful transition to democracy after the Arab Spring, while 2 shows how Libya is close to achieving a similar type of government.

- 3 According to the article, which of the following people have perspectives that are MOST similar?
- (A) The Assad regime and the government of Bahrain
 - (B) Houthi rebels in Yemen and the Transitional National Council in Libya
 - (C) Houthi rebels in Yemen and protesters in Bahrain
 - (D) The Assad regime and the Transitional National Council in Libya
- 4 Which answer choice BEST explains the author's purpose in this article?
- (A) The author wanted to convince the reader that the Arab Spring was a protest movement that resulted in greater freedoms and liberty for the people of the Middle East.
 - (B) The author wanted to explain the Arab Spring in a way that would help the reader understand the international effects throughout Asia, Africa, and the Americas.
 - (C) The author wanted to describe the experiences of those who lived through the Arab Spring so the reader could understand the Arab Spring from a personal perspective.
 - (D) The author wanted to help the reader understand the key events and groups involved in the Arab Spring in different countries.