

Review:

The Arab Revolution: The Lessons from the Democratic Uprising

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Jean-Pierre Filiu: The Arab Revolution: The Lessons from the Democratic Uprising. C. Hurst & Co. Publishers Ltd, 2011. ISBN-10: 1849041598, ISBN-13: 978-1849041591, 256 pages.

The so-called “Arab Spring” is a political phenomenon that is difficult to evaluate in a short interval of time. Any current book about it is doomed to a very rapid obsolescence. The book *The Arab Revolution* by the French professor Jean-Pierre Filiu from Sciences Po Paris was published in summer 2011, so logically it could include only the period of revolutionary changes in Tunisia and Egypt, but not, for example, the outcome of the bloody phase of the Libyan revolution and the overthrow and death of Muammar Qaddafi. The book also marginally deals with the situations in Jordan, Yemen, Bahrain and some other countries. Nevertheless, the book is certainly worth reading because it is not just a summary of the actual facts, but due to Filiu’s erudition it also helps to explain not only the specific events of the Arab Spring, but also the wider logic of the policies in the Arab world and the Middle East in general.

Filiu knows very well what the problems of the subject he is surveying are. His main aim was to approach the Arab Spring comprehensively and in a broader context. He divides the text into several clearly defined chapters,

and in them he methodically goes through important events and the actors of the revolutionary events. Perhaps the only flaw here is that the names of some chapters, like “The Islamists have to choose,” “Palestine is still the mantra,” or “The alternative of democracy is chaos,” come off as too categorical.

Mohammed Bouazizi as Jan Palach

In his book Filiu appreciates the civil aspect of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the countries' ability to achieve success in this respect even without the presence of strong personalities and virtually without violence. He distinguishes those revolutions from the revolution in Libya, where civil protests came under the repression of the Qaddafi regime and quickly gained a violent character. An interesting point is the differentiation between the different backgrounds of the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. While in Tunisia the anti-government unrest began in the periphery, in the provincial cities such as Sidi Bouzid, where Mohammed Bouazizi immolated himself, in Egypt the strong support for the revolution came mainly from large cities like Cairo and Alexandria, and its main focal point became Tahrir Square in Cairo. As a Czech writer I must also mention an interesting analogy used by Filiu in relation to the self-immolation of the Tunisian Mohammed Bouazizi: In Filiu's opinion Bouazizi became a kind of Arabic version of the Czechoslovak student Jan Palach, who immolated himself in protest of the communist regime and the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia. But Bouazizi's immolation was closer in time to the overthrow of the hated regime that he protested against than the Prague student's immolation was to the overthrow of the Czechoslovak communist regime.

The role of social networks

In one chapter the author analyzes in detail the role of Internet social networks in the revolution. Social networks have been often associated with the Arab Spring, and especially in the West it became a very “fashionable” and probably also overvalued topic. Filiu concludes that social networks

played an important role especially in the early stages of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. He clearly summarizes the situation as follows: “Social networks contributed to subvert the ubiquitous security control in Tunisia, and they constituted the spark of the January 25th’ revolution in Egypt. In both instances, they were crucial in nurturing a community feeling of shared grief and aspirations, mainly among the educated and urban youth. By exposing the lies and crimes of the ruling regime, they helped to bring down the wall of fear. Once this was done, their real importance in the revolutionary process became secondary.”

In connection with the frequently discussed role of Islamists (and radical Islamists) in the Arab Spring, Filiu highlights the partly surprising inability of Islamist radicals and al-Qaeda to adequately exploit the situation to their advantage and their impotence in this regard. Filiu also mentions the decline of al-Qaeda in general and briefly mentions the death of Osama Bin Laden in connection with this matter.

It is interesting to compare the author’s optimism (which in 2011 was shared by perhaps all who were interested in the political reality in the Arab world) and the current situation of the Middle East. Filiu quite realistically considers the events of 2011 as only the beginning of the process of broader changes throughout the Arab world. Even though today it is still too early to assess the processes in the Arab world – a true evaluation of the consequences of the Arab Spring will have to wait at least several years – we can already see some differences between the expectations and the reality, which in many cases does not match the optimistic predictions of many Arab revolutionaries and commentators.

Bottom line

Filiu’s book is, in my opinion, a very comprehensive work and it summarizes very skilfully the limited amount of information about the developments in the Arab world. The book also has an added value due to the additional information it provides (e.g. the selection of interesting documents and

lyrics of protest songs in the appendix). The book will also probably gain a wider circle of readers because while it uses some scientific vocabulary words and expressions, it is generally written in a more popular style. In several places the author also does not hesitate to display his sense of humor. But none of this in any way diminishes the professionalism with which the whole book is written.

Some might criticize the book on the grounds that it does not evaluate the behavior of foreign players and the world superpowers. After all, the popular saying “The world is interested in the Middle East only when it comes to oil and natural gas.” is still being used. Although the book is directed more toward the internal developments of the Arab countries and assumes that the key impetus for the Arab Spring came directly from the interior (i.e. their citizens), it would be interesting if Filiu’s book said more about the foreign and superpower influences on the Arab Spring. At least in the case of Libya, it was apparent already when Filiu wrote the related chapters of his book that the motives for the involvement of superpowers or states such as France and Italy were not just purely humanitarian.

The strength of the book lies in its complexity – at least in some very important respects: The book provides an excellent overview of the context of the indirect circumstances of the Arab Spring and also takes into account the related sociological and psychological factors. This method serves to make the book more interdisciplinary. The book is not some “dry” scientific evaluation of the circumstances of the Arab Spring, but it is also not merely a journalistic work on the subject. The book is very successful in managing to combine a number of approaches, and the result is that both the expert and the “common” man who knows about what happens in the Middle East only from television and other forms of popular media must feel that after reading Filiu’s book, they know much more about the Arab Spring and the Middle East than before.