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Transcript

The Arab Revolutions of 2011: The Struggle Against Autocracy Resumed

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Eugene Rogan:

The revolutions sweeping the Arab world in 2011 have caught the world by complete surprise. For decades, the Arab world has lived under a variety of governments whose only point in common was the degree of autocracy they imposed on their citizens. Some blamed Arab culture, others said that Islam was incompatible with democracy, but most agreed that the Arabs were bucking a global trend of democratisation around the world. Yet the events of 2011 have decisively undermined the notion that the Arabs aren't ready for – or don't want – democracy.

The demands for political freedoms made by protestors in North Africa, the Middle East and Persian Gulf over the past months underscore the broad-based appetite for democratic rule. Repressed for decades by their governments, denied their basic freedoms, and driven to the lowest global levels of human development, millions of Arabs have reached breaking point with corrupt and autocratic governments that have enriched themselves at the expense of their citizens. People across the Arab world understood the despair that drove the Tunisian vegetable seller Mohamed Bouazizi to set himself on fire in protests against an unjust and venal government – and were inspired by his terrible example to rise up and demand their political rights.

However, the search for democratic government is not new in the Middle East. What most people in the West don't realize is that the events of 2011 have deep historical roots stretching back to the early nineteenth century. Arab reformers have debated the merits of constitutional government since the 1830s, and have sought to constrain absolutism with elected assemblies since the 1860s. Even in the nineteenth century, it was Egypt and Tunisia that led the reform agenda in the Arab world. Following the examples of Cairo and Tunis, liberal political reform movements emerged in the broader Middle East, with constitutional revolutions in Iran in 1906, and in the Ottoman Empire in 1908. As history shows, democracy is not new to the Middle East. In the long run, the past six decades of autocratic rule might well be remembered as but a setback in two centuries of popular pressure for constitutional rule and democratic rights.

Ironically, given our present day doubts about the role of Islam in politics, the person who initiated the discussion of constitutionalism in the Arab world was a young Muslim cleric named Riffa al-Tahtawi. Tahtawi left his native Egypt in April 1826 dressed in the robes and turban of a scholar of Cairo's ancient mosque university of al-Azhar. He was bound for France, appointed chaplain to Egypt's first major education mission to Europe. He would not see his native land another five years. While in France, he kept a detailed diary in

which he recorded his observations about what was to him a strange and exotic land. He wrote up his experiences in a classic book published in Arabic in 1834, and subsequently republished in Turkish translation. It was the best-seller of its day, and became an enduring classic that is still in print in Arabic and in several foreign languages.

While Tahtawi's book is full of fascinating reflections on what, in Egyptian eyes, made France of the 1820s tick, he made his most substantial contribution to political reform through his analysis of constitutional government. He translated all seventy-four articles of the 1814 French Constitution, or *Charte constitutionnelle*, and gave an enthusiastic endorsement of its key points as the secret of French progress in all domains.

Tahtawi's praise for constitutional government was courageous for its time. These were dangerous new ideas with no roots in Islamic tradition. As Tahtawi confessed, most of the principles of the French Constitution 'cannot be found in the Quran nor in the *sunna* [practices] of the Prophet.' While he might have feared the reaction of his fellow Muslim clerics to these dangerous innovations, he took the even greater risk of provoking the disfavour of his rulers. After all, the Constitution applied to the king and his subjects alike, and called for a division of powers between the monarch and an elected legislature. Muhammad Ali's Egypt was a thoroughly autocratic state, and the Ottoman Empire was an absolute monarchy. The very notion of representative government or constraints on the powers of the monarch would have been seen as alien and subversive by most Ottoman elites.

In his most daring breach of Ottoman political conventions, Tahtawi gave a detailed and sympathetic account of the 1830 Revolution in France that overthrew the Bourbon King Charles X. Sunni Muslim political thought asserted the duty of subjects to submit to rulers, even despotic rulers, in the interest of public order. Tahtawi, who observed the political drama at first hand, clearly sided with the French people against their king when Charles X suspended the Charter and 'shamed the laws in which the rights of the French people were enshrined.' Tahtawi's extensive analysis of the July Revolution is all the more remarkable for its implicit endorsement of the people's right to overturn a monarch to preserve their legal rights. These were arguments that the demonstrators in Cairo's Tahrir Square could have used against the Mubarak regime in 2011.

Though Tahtawi would not witness a constitutional revolution in his own lifetime, he did enjoy seeing his ideas taken up by reformers in other parts of North Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean. Tunisia, like Egypt, gained

sufficient autonomy from the Ottoman Empire to pursue its own development projects in the nineteenth century. Its government, known as the Regency, had been headed by the Husaynid Dynasty since the early eighteenth century. Between 1837 and 1855, Tunis was ruled by a reformer named Ahmad Bey. Heavily influenced by the experience of Muhammad Ali in Egypt, Ahmad Bey created a modern army in Tunisia, along with a military academy and support industries. Among the military men trained for the new army was a brilliant young officer named Khayr al-Din, who would prove one of the great reformers of the nineteenth century, and rose to be prime minister both in Tunis and in the Ottoman Empire itself.

Fluent in French, Arabic and Turkish, Khayr al-Din travelled widely through Europe and the Ottoman Empire in the course of his career. His first hand experience of European progress made him an ardent supporter of liberal political reforms, and the need to draw on European experience and technology to enable Muslim states to realize their full potential. He set out his views in an influential political tract published in Arabic in 1867, and in an authorized French translation two years later.

In the French and Arabic editions of his book, Khayr al-Din addressed his reform agenda to both a European audience sceptical of the Muslim world's ability to adapt to the modern age, and to a Muslim audience that rejected foreign innovations as somehow contrary to the religion and values of Islam. In that sense, his times were not so different from our own.

While Khayr al-Din was an outspoken advocate for political and economic reform, he was a fiscal conservative. He wanted to see Tunisia develop its economic base to be able to support the expense of modern technology. Such financial sound management required intelligent government. Khayr al-Din watched with growing dismay as he saw the rulers of Tunisia take their country down the road to insolvency through vanity projects and bad investments. 'It is clear that the excessive expenses which burden the kingdom beyond its capability are the result of arbitrary rule,' Khayr al-Din warned.

To reform-minded thinkers like Khayr al-Din, the solution to both reckless government spending and arbitrary rule lay in constitutional reforms and representative government. The echoes of Tahtawi's analysis of the French constitution (which Khayr al-Din acknowledged in his own book) could be heard very clearly in the second half of the nineteenth century. And so Khayr al-Din worked to introduce constitutional rule in Tunisia.

The Tunisian Constitution of 1861 fell well short of reformers' hopes. The text of the constitution placed few limits on the executive power of the Bey, who retained the right to appoint and dismiss his ministers. However, it did call for the establishment of a representative assembly, the Grand Council, composed of sixty members nominated by the ruler. Khayr al-Din, appointed President of the Grand Council, was soon disillusioned by the assembly's limited powers to curb the Bey's excesses. He recognized that the Bey and his prime minister had only convened the Council to rubber stamp their decisions, and tendered his resignation in 1863.

Egypt's first parliamentary experiment took root in the 1860s as well. The Khedive (Viceroy) of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, called for the creation of the first Consultative Council of Deputies in 1866. The Council was composed of seventy-five members indirectly elected to three-year terms, whose role was limited to a consultative capacity (Deputies had no role in making the laws of Egypt). Though a creation of the ruler, the Council became a forum for Egyptian elites to voice criticism of the policies of the ruler and his government, and marked the beginning of broader participation in the affairs of state.

If reformers in Tunisia and Egypt had hoped to stave off economic collapse by constitutional reforms, they were to be sadly disappointed. The early constitutional movements were too respectful of authority to impose constraints on their rulers. They seemed to hope that the Bey in Tunis or the Khedive in Cairo would accept constraints voluntarily, and share power with representative assemblies as an act of enlightened benevolence. These were not realistic expectations. The absolute rulers of Egypt and Tunisia clung tenaciously to power, and there was no constraint to prevent them from spending their governments into insolvency.

The government of Tunisia declared bankruptcy in 1869, and Egypt in 1876. In both cases, bankruptcy led to European financial intervention and colonial occupation. France seized Tunisia in 1881, and Britain occupied Egypt the following year.

With the imposition of European colonial rule, constitutional reforms in Egypt and Tunisia came to a halt until the end of the First World War. Yet outside the Arab world, other parts of the Middle East witnessed constitutional revolutions to constrain absolute rulers – in Iran (then known as Persia) and the Ottoman Empire.

Inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1905, which forced the Tsar to concede a constitution to his people, a group of Iranian reformers began to mobilize in

mosques to demand the rule of law in their own country. The reform movement gained momentum and drew on all levels of society in support of their basic demand for a constitution. The ruling Qajar dynasty tried by all means to preserve absolutism, but by the end of 1906 the Shah capitulated to public pressure and signed into law a newly drafted constitution establishing an independent judiciary and legislature. While the 1906 revolution might not have delivered the full democracy that activists had hoped for, the country remained under constitutional rule until the 1920s, when an officer named Reza Shah re-established autocratic rule in Iran under the new Pahlevi dynasty.

Turkey's democratic experiments also date back to the nineteenth century. Sultan Abdulhamid II (who ruled from 1876 to 1909) introduced a constitution and oversaw parliamentary elections in the early months of his reign, only to dismiss the parliament in February 1877 when it began to criticize the government's handling of a disastrous war with Russia. For the next thirty years, Abdulhamid imposed his autocracy against a growing opposition movement of young and well-educated reformers, civilians and military graduates of the Empire's elite academies known as the Young Turks. The movement reached its climax in 1908 when the Young Turks forced the Sultan to restore constitutional and parliamentary life in the Ottoman Empire. One year later, the Young Turks deposed the Sultan and ruled in consultation with an elected parliament. Even after the ultimate defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the First World War, parliamentary life and constitutional government were preserved in the Turkish Republic.

In the decades between the First and Second World Wars, Egypt achieved the highest degree of multi-party democracy in the modern history of the Arab world. The Constitution of 1923 introduced political pluralism, regular elections to a two-chamber legislature, full male suffrage and a free press. A number of new parties emerged on the political stage. Elections attracted massive turnout at the polls. Journalists plied their trade with remarkable liberty.

However, this liberal era is remembered more for its divisive factionalism than as a golden age of Egyptian politics. Three distinct authorities sought pre-eminence in Egypt: the British, the monarchy, and, through parliament, the nationalist Wafd Party. The rivalry between these three proved very disruptive to politics in Egypt. The political elites were a fractious bunch whose internecine squabbles played into the hands of both the king and the British. Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that little progress was made in securing Egypt's independence from Britain.

The Egyptian political leadership was itself divided on constitutionalism and parliamentary life. The popular nationalist leader Saad Zaghlul, led his Wafd Party to sweeping victory in Egypt's first parliamentary election and used that mandate to try and negotiate Egypt's independence from Britain. At the opposite end of the political spectrum was the independent Ismail Sidqi, who defected from Zaghlul's Wafd Party. Sidqi was an advocate of a strong monarchy and opposed the 'parliamentary autocracy which the 1923 Constitution afforded, with the tyranny of the majority over the minority.' Sidqi wanted to free government from constitutional bonds and rule by decree in partnership with the King.

In the summer of 1930, King Fuad invited Sidqi to form a new cabinet. In accepting, Sidqi assured his monarch that 'my policies would start from a clean slate and that I would reorganize parliamentary life in accordance with my views on the Constitution and the need for stable government.' In October, 1930, Sidqi introduced a new constitution that expanded the powers of the king at the expense of the parliament. It reduced the number of elected deputies in the parliament and gave the king control over the upper chamber. Sidqi's constitution reduced universal suffrage, taking voting power from the masses (on whose support the Wafd relied) and concentrate electoral authority in the propertied elite. The powers of the legislature were reduced, as the length of the parliamentary session was reduced from six to five months, and the king's powers to defer bills were expanded.

The new constitution was blatantly autocratic and provoked near unanimous opposition from politicians across the political spectrum and the general public. When the press criticized Sidqi and the 1930 Constitution, he simply closed the papers down and locked the journalists up.

Yet ultimately Sidqi failed. The press, refusing to be silenced, kept up a steady barrage to turn public opinion against Sidqi's government. Security conditions began to deteriorate as the public grew more outspoken against Sidqi's government. Sidqi had always justified autocratic rule in terms of providing law and order. Faced with growing disorder, the British began to pressure for a new government to restore public confidence and curb political violence. Sidqi's revolution had stalled and was now coming undone. In September 1933 the King dismissed his Prime Minister. Down but not out, Sidqi would remain one of Egypt's most influential politicians until his death in 1950. Yet his machinations against constitutional rule did much to undermine public confidence in the democratic institutions of Egypt's Liberal Age.

By 1952, the Egyptian people had lost faith in the institutions of democratic government. Political parties had been platforms of factionalism. The British had played on divisions between the monarchy and the parliament to extend their rule over Egypt. Even the nationalist Wafd Party had lost popular support when, after thirty years, they still had not secured Egypt's total independence. When a group of military men, led by Col. Gamal Abd al-Nasir, seized power in Egypt in July 1952, the people of Egypt and of the Arab world at large celebrated a new order of forceful, decisive government. Free Officer revolutions followed in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, ushering in a new age of autocratic rule under military men and technocrats that would last over half a century.

For six decades now, the Arab world has lived under absolute rule of one form or another. Monarchy survived primarily in the oil-rich states of the Arabian Peninsula. The only two non-oil monarchies to survive were in Morocco and Jordan, where charismatic kings enjoyed sufficient support to weather the revolutionary 1950s and 1960s. The rest of the Arab world, with the exception of Lebanon's dangerous sectarian democracy, fell under the rule of military men turned presidents and single party rule. Neither the monarchies nor the praetorian republics were tolerant of opposition. Government monopoly of the press and censorship limited the scope of debate. Constitutions were amended in ways that enhanced the power of government at the expense of citizens' rights. That Arabs should agree to live under such a miserable social contract only convinced the outside world that the Arabs were somehow incompatible with democracy. Reforms and constitutional debates stretching back to the 1830s were forgotten by Arabs and Westerners alike.

Several factors contributed to make 2011 a revolutionary year in the Arab world. Over the past twenty years, the standard of living in the non-oil Arab states has dropped to the lowest level of human development. Only Sub-Saharan Africa scores worse on the UN's Human Development Index. Yet the ruling elite did not share in the suffering of common Arab citizens. On the contrary, corruption and cronyism had enriched the ruling elite surrounding kings and presidents in ways that were all too obvious to the common citizen. With this growing inequality came deepening resentment as a young and increasingly well educated population entered the job market...only to find that there were no jobs. Worse yet, these aged and corrupt leaders were paving the way for family members to succeed them in dynastic succession. Arab citizens faced the prospect of unending restrictions on their political and

human rights by leaders who had failed them in every respect...and rebelled. Much to the world's surprise, it was Tunisia that led the way.

The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi galvanized public outrage against everything that was wrong in Tunisia under President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali's reign: corruption, abuse of power, indifference to the plight of the ordinary man, and an economy that failed to provide opportunities for the young. After twenty-three years in power, Ben Ali had no solutions.

However much the Tunisian dictator was reviled, it was his wife, Leila Trabelsi, and her family that became the focus of public outrage. It was common knowledge in Tunisia that the Trabelsis had enriched themselves, but the rumors were confirmed through the publication of U.S. State Department reports from Tunisia by the Wikileaks website. Reports by U.S. diplomats on the Trabelsi family's extravagances were made public at much the same time news of Mohamed Bouazizi's tragedy was gaining circulation.

On January 4, 2011, Mohamed Bouazizi died of his burns. An individual tragedy, a communal protest movement, a discontented nation, social networking websites, Arabic satellite television, and Wikileaks: it was the making of the perfect twenty-first century political storm. When Ben Ali realized that he no longer commanded the loyalty of his army, and that no concessions were going to mollify the demonstrators, he stunned his nation and the entire Arab world by abdicating power and fleeing Tunisia for Saudi Arabia on January 14, 2011. The success of the revolution in Tunisia sent shock waves around the Arab world: If it could happen in Tunisia, it could happen anywhere.

'The people should not fear their government,' read a placard in Cairo's central Tahrir ('liberation') Square. 'Governments should fear their people.' The message captured the moment as hundreds of thousands of democracy activists using social networking software to organize their grassroots movement brought the whole of Egypt to a standstill. Known as the January 25 Movement, the Egyptian Revolution of 2011 witnessed mass demonstrations in Cairo, Alexandria, Suez, Ismailiyya, and other major Egyptian towns and cities.

For eighteen days the whole world watched transfixed as Egypt's democracy movement challenged the Mubarak regime – and won. As Ben Ali before him, Mubarak recognized his position was untenable without his army's support. On 11 February he stood down to jubilation and wild celebrations in Tahrir Square. The shock waves redoubled after the success of the Egyptian revolution: If it could happen in Egypt, it would happen everywhere.

And so it has. Emboldened by the fall of Egypt's strong man, popular demonstrations have followed across the Arab world: in Jordan, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya. Long after Western analysts had dismissed Arabism, it was clear that what happened in one part of the Arab world was incredibly influential across the rest of the region. Bound by a common language and historic experience, and now linked by satellite television and social networking websites, a new Arab movement is unfolding in 2011. Yet it is a movement with deep historic roots, putting to rest once and for all the myth that the Arabs as a people, or Muslims more generally, are somehow incompatible with democratic values.