



# COMMENTARY

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## **The Jasmine Revolution:**

### **From Redefining the Narrative to the Consolidation of Democracy**

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Whatever the future trajectory of the Jasmine Revolution for the Arab world and Iran, let us be clear on one point: it has already served to debunk certain dominant narratives concerning the Middle East. These held that the Arab world was somehow culturally not ready for democracy; and linked to this stereotype, another deeply ingrained yet equally fallacious narrative: that it is either the strong autocrat or the radical Islamists. Local strong men played on these Western fears in a generally-successful bid to achieve Western support to consolidate their illegitimate rule over hapless citizens. Indeed, the increasingly-isolated Muammar Gaddafi has alleged that the popular uprisings taking place in Libya was the work of Osama bin Laden and Al Qaeda. Unfortunately for him, neither his countrymen nor the international community bought this.

The proverbial Arab Street had finally spoken and it articulated a third way between the despots and the fundamentalists—that of liberal democracy. In so doing, Arabs (and Iranians) not only challenged the hegemonic narratives of the past, but also claimed liberal democracy as a universal value, not merely a Western one.

But democracy is not an event, but a process— not without its reversals. To put it another way: is the Jasmine Revolution an 1848 moment which would be displaced by new strong men or is this a 1989 moment—making the march to freedom irreversible? Several challenges confront these countries, which have already gone through the throes of the revolution. Elated with the overthrow of long-sitting despots, popular expectations are extremely high for a better life. State resources, however, cannot meet these expectations and may result in further tension and conflict. Two recent developments illustrate this point well. Egyptians have taken to the street once again, unhappy with the pace of progress set by the military. Indeed, another fault-line may soon be opening up on the civil-military front as the opposition challenges the military's economic monopoly— almost a third of the Egyptian economy is said to be owned by the military. In Tunisia, meanwhile, the Prime Minister was compelled to step down as citizens wrestled with the balance between change and continuity in the polity.

As the human tsunami of the revolutionaries took to the streets, where they were confronted by the security forces of recalcitrant regimes, the West largely called for restraint, democratic reform and in the case of Libya, sanctions. However, if this is to be a 1989 moment, then it is imperative that Western countries get more involved with countries like Tunisia and Egypt to ensure that democratic reforms become irreversible. They could also help by boosting state capacity on the socio-economic front to assist new governments to meet heightened popular expectations. This would entail everything from technical expertise in constitutional drafting to training of armed forces and the management of local government.

This active (as opposed to the current largely passive and reactive) involvement of the West in consolidating the region's nascent democracies is necessary not just due to humanitarian imperatives, but also because of national interest considerations. The best indication of the bankruptcy of a political ideology—radical Islamism— must surely be when its supposed constituency embraces liberal democracy. This is a goal which the West needs to robustly to support not through mere words, but through decisive action.

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