NOREF Article

Rethinking the promotion of democracy after the Syrian uprising

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Executive summary

Despite some claims that Arab activists owe their stunning successes to U.S. pro-democracy workshops, all evidence suggests that the Arab uprisings occurred *despite* nearly two decades of Western promotion of democracy and support to civil society groups, not because of it. The Syrian uprising, particularly its onset, shows in instructive, stark contours that most Western promoters of democracy have been barking up the wrong tree: in Syria, popular mobilisation and calls for "human dignity" and political change did not come from Western-supported organisations in the Arab world – civil liberty NGOs, human rights associations and civil society organisations – but from an amorphous and mostly leaderless assortment of individuals defying conventional attempts at social classification. Promoters of democracy are advised to identify, acknowledge and understand these improbable agents of change if their future efforts are to stand a chance of success.

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Despite some claims that Arab activists owe their stunning successes to U.S. pro-democracy workshops, all evidence suggests that the Arab uprisings occurred *despite* nearly two decades of Western promotion of democracy and support to civil society groups, not because of it. The Syrian uprising, particularly its onset, shows that most Western promoters of democracy have been barking up the wrong tree, and that popular mobilisation and loud calls for "human dignity" and political change did not come from the Western-supported organisations in the Arab world – civil liberty NGOs, human rights associations and civil society organisations – but from an amorphous and mostly leaderless assortment of individuals that defy conventional attempts at social classification. In a world in which Freedom House still brands 48 countries as "not free", promoters of democracy are advised to identify, acknowledge and understand these improbable agents of change if their future efforts are to stand a chance of success.

In terms of the structural causes of the Syrian uprising, probably a mix of factors needs to be considered. If there ever were an implicit "social contract" between the Baathist regime and its once-sizeable constituencies of support, the latter surely felt that they had been let down over the last few years. Firstly, the regime drastically downsized its populist policies previously benefitting civil servants, workers, farmers and ethnic minorities alike. Government efforts since the early 2000s to build a "social market economy" in real terms meant that only a tiny clique managed to access rents associated with private investment or real estate speculation. This culminated in a level of cronyism excluding all but a few of Bashar al-Assad's relatives and their immediate clients. The rest of the country's inhabitants, including the impoverished middle classes, were simply told to accept that the food and fuel subsidies and state-owned enterprises were no longer viable. Secondly, Assad's ascent to power in 2000, and hence the country's conversion into a "hereditary republic", even caused raised eyebrows among some of the regime' supporters. Worse still, the regime failed to act on its promises of political reform to sweeten the pill. The only change in the regime's penchant for heavy-handed surveillance and control was that political prisoners were increasingly tried in

front of criminal courts instead of being made to "disappear" without much procedural ado. Finally, the regime may have enjoyed some legitimacy thanks to its foreign policies opposing Israel and the U.S. Yet Assad came to rely excessively on – and be identified with – Iran and Hizbullah, which upset the country's Sunni majority. Paraphrasing Barrington Moore, a scholar on revolutions and rebellion, the Syrian regime's faults neatly displayed those kinds of violations of the social contract "that quite generally arouse moral anger and a sense of injustice among those subject to authority".[1]

Yet for an understanding of how in this context of accumulating grievances Syrians managed to effectively mobilise against one of the most repressive authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and beyond, one has to dig deeper. What is certain in this respect is that an analysis fed by conventional civil society axioms simply does not hold water. Years of tyranny, selective co-option, divide-and-rule policies and factionalism made Syria's civil society all but ineffective, compromised or marginalised. As a result, political parties, opposition platforms, civil and human rights groups, and NGOs – indeed, all those whom conventional democracy promotion initiatives would have liked to see pressing for change – have been profoundly inadequate. Neither have any of these actors been able to respond effectively to the uprising, let alone lead, co-ordinate or organise it. The impetus for popular mobilisation in favour of democratisation and restoring civil rights, and the source of its sustained and remarkably effective organisation for nearly a year have come from somewhere else.

A closer look at the onset of Syria's uprising in the southern governorate of Daraa in March 2011 points to the province's dense social networks involving family clans, circular labour migration, cross-border movements and crime as key factors. These networks proved to be crucial in prompting and sustaining exceptionally effective popular mobilisation against authoritarian rule. Firstly, such networks served as a social site that was relatively independent from the state's authoritarian surveillance techniques where

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1   Barrington Moore, *Injustice: The Social Bases of Obedience and Revolt,* New York, ME Sharpe, 1978, p 20.

grievances and non-conformist views on Baathist subordination could develop, be refined and expressed, and, perhaps most importantly, shared. Daraa's distinctly transnational networks contributed to the transfer, circulation and interpretation of information whereby the shifting opportunities emanating from revolutionary events in the region – first in Tunisia, then in Egypt – were recognised and translated for local purposes. Especially the clans' conservative moral universe caused the regime's threats and violence to be framed in ways that compelled people to act instead of withdrawing in submission. From the start of the uprising, these networks have provided a strong sense of solidarity and presented the background against which recruitment for mobilisation took place, both voluntarily and because of social pressure. In addition, Daraa's networks supplied key skills and resources for mobilisation to become effective and to be sustained under extremely difficult conditions of heightened regime repression. Finally, and thanks to their overlapping or cross-cutting qualities, Daraa's dense social networks substituted for the leading role conventionally attributed to "brokers" (in social science parlance) or "conspirators" (the Syrian regime's preferred term), thereby connecting individuals from different origins throughout the region, urban or rural, and belonging to varying socio-economic strata. What resulted was Daraa's – and subsequently Syria's – "leaderless" mobilisation. This gave the uprising an additional source of resilience in the face of regime violence and repression that searched in vain for leading "conspirators" to eliminate. Consequently, the people who initiated and carried out Syria's uprising comprised clan members; workers commuting between their homes and Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf; so-called *bahara* ("sailors", i.e. unregulated taxi and truck drivers); and *zgeds* (trickster-type petty criminals). Some were poor, others were quite well off, several were unemployed, a few ran their own businesses. Their ages varied between the mid-20s and the late 40s. When they met each other at the frontlines of confrontation with the regime's security forces in Daraa, they grouped themselves into ad hoc "neighbourhood committees", thereby unwittingly producing a template for organising the uprising that spread to the rest of the governorate and then to the country at large.

For a long time both Syrian regime incumbents and pro-democracy activists perceived Daraa – or the Hawran, as the region is also called – as a peripheral backwater. They viewed its inhabitants as largely uneducated, pro-Baathist, conservative, parochial and politically passive farmers – the very antithesis of the "modern" Syria they both claim to strive for. Ironically, these misperceptions played into the hands of Daraa's mobilisers because, back in early 2011 all eyes – of intelligence bosses and opposition activists alike – were focused on Syria's major cities or the customarily more restive north-eastern part of the country in anticipation of protests and demonstrations. Daraa's susceptibility to the powerful messages and images generated by the revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt may thus have been much greater than elsewhere in the country, exactly because of such prevailing stereotypes. Telling in this respect is that months into the uprising some Syrian activists still refused to acknowledge that the insurrection had started in Daraa and not in Damascus.

Some Western promoters of democracy knew that their more conventional "civil society" partners in the Arab world were ineffectual at best. Since roughly the mid-1990s the search has thus been on for "alternative", more "genuine", or just more-pragmatic partners. Most promising have been recent, yet still-timid efforts to work with groups and individuals outside capital cities, those operating in the region's bulging informal economies and young cyber activists. The nature of Daraa's networks and their role in mobilisation suggests that this approach deserves to be further developed. This is not to argue in favour of substituting conventional civil society templates with another one, as if the specificities of one case of potent mobilisation against authoritarian rule could generate universal models. "Authoritarianism" remains an utterly inadequate residual category for widely varying forms of undemocratic governance and repression. Similarly, the social spaces left unattended by or developing in response to authoritarian rule will vary from case to case, and these will need to be separately assessed. However, there are reasons to believe that at least some qualities of Syria's networks of resistance are not entirely unique. As Indian sociologists Vinay Gidwani and K. Sivaramakrishnan noted in 2003, circular "migrants are part of a travelling

culture that exposes them to diverse worlds of association and signification that sow the seeds of discontent".[2] American anthropologist James Scott similarly observed in 1990 that "the principle carriers of [anti-regime convictions and imagined alternatives] are likely to follow trades or vocations that encourage physical mobility".[3]

Revolutions are notoriously unpredictable and contingent on many factors escaping democracy promoters' – and, indeed, anybody else's – control. To be sure, the social networks that were

instrumental to the Syrian uprising possibly could only play their powerful mobilising role because the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions' bringing down of the region's walls of fear provided such a powerful example to follow. Neither do mobilisation and popular uprisings alone ensure democratic outcomes, as is painfully illustrated by the brutality of the regime's repression in Syria, which is currently pushing the country into civil war. For these and other reasons, it could even be argued that democracy promotion should not or cannot entail encouraging revolutions. But if the search for genuine and credible partners for the promotion of democracy is still on, then such partners are to be found in the seemingly improbable backwoods of authoritarian states and the kind of amorphous social networks still braving the regime's onslaught in Syria.

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2 Vinay Gidwani & K. Sivaramakrishnan, "Circular migration and the spaces of cultural assertion", *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol 93, no. 1, 2003, p 191.

3 James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1990, p 124.