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Voice after Exit: Revolution and Migration in the Arab World

By Philippe Fargues
European University Institute

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On December 17, 2010, a 26-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in a small town in central Tunisia, unwittingly triggering a revolution that would ultimately overthrow a 24-year-long dictatorship in that country. Within a few weeks of this incident, revolts flared up across the Arab world, gripping countries from the Gulf to the Atlantic.

Cairo's largely peaceful protesters removed a 30-year regime in Egypt, and major, violent confrontations between citizens and their governments have taken place in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen. Mounting civil unrest has moved the Libyan regime to launch a war against its own people, while Algeria, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, and even the two apparently stable kingdoms of Morocco and Saudi Arabia have been shaken by waves of demonstrators claiming democratic rights and calling for fundamental reforms.

The Arab Spring has resuscitated the vitality of the Arab peoples' shared identity. While it is rightly regarded as the first mass mobilization propagated by the internet and virtual forms of communication, one must also acknowledge that the same causes have produced the same responses in different places.

The Arab revolts are all rooted in intense frustration among the youth of the various countries involved. In all cases, there is a thread linking protest and international migration, but it is a mistake to fear that the uprisings taking place in the Middle East and North Africa might result in mass migration towards Europe. In fact, the dawn of democracy in the Arab world offers Europe an opportunity not to be missed.

The Rise of Arab Youth

A traveler visiting the Arab world in the 1970s and 1980s would have been struck by how many children there were in private and in public, in urban and rural settings. Returning today to the same places, one would now find very few children and a large number of young adults. The children of yesterday have grown up, but they have not been replaced.

For decades, managing population growth has been viewed as a problem by Arab governments. Until the 1980s, the problem was with rapid growth and high levels of fertility. The policy solution lay in demography itself; more precisely in promoting birth control. Family planning programs were put into place and eventually became quite effective, so that the annual number of births stabilized and even shrank in some places.

The largest generation, which was born in the 1980s, has reached working age and has caused the population problem to shift: young adults are now perceived as the most problematic age group. Their growth

About the Author

Philippe Fargues is a sociologist and demographer, and is currently Director of the Migration Policy Centre at the European University Institute in Florence, Italy. He was a founding Director of the Center for Migration and Refugee Studies at the American University in Cairo, a senior researcher and head of the Migration Unit at the French National Institute for Demographic Studies in Paris, a visiting professor at Harvard, and a researcher in Lebanon, Cameroon, and Côte d'Ivoire.

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has outpaced the resources available to them, from employment that provides income and status, to freedom, participation, and agency.

Arab labor markets have become especially unfriendly to young adults. Not only is the largest generation ever born in the Arab world now at working age, but the recent decline in birth rates is linked with two other trends that exert pressure on the labor market: the changing role of women, and the fast development of formal education.

The high birth rates that prevailed until recently were linked with women marrying at an early age and refraining from entering the labor force altogether or leaving it soon after marriage. For years Arab populations had, by far, the world's lowest rates of female economic participation.

In contrast, the low birth rates among Arab populations today are correlated with delayed marriage and the growing economic participation of women; a fact that increases pressures on employment. Moreover, young people — both women and men, alike — who are now searching for employment have received more education than any generation before them, causing human capital to soar. On average, Arab populations in 2011 have an overall annual growth rate of between 1 and 2 percent, while the active age population is rising by 3 percent per year, the demand for employment by 4 or 5 percent, and the amount of human capital by 6 to 8 percent.

Mounting Frustration

Are exceptionally large numbers of young adults, many of whom well-educated, an opportunity or a burden for Arab societies? Two interpretations are possible.

The first is the optimistic and more theoretical view defended by some development agencies that claim that these large numbers of potential workers could be the key to increased opportunity for economic development. A demographic surplus at working age, sometimes called a "youth bulge," can alleviate the relative cost of dependent age groups (children and the elderly) and is, therefore, favorable for savings and investment.

In order to save, however, young adults need to work and earn an income. But in Arab labor markets, more often than not it is unemployment that awaits job seekers, in particular those with medium- to high-level education. When a job is finally found after a long period of expectation or even exclusion, low wages and poor returns on education are the norm.

If young adults are not offered employment opportunities and rewards for their education, then the youth bulge is a liability, not an asset.

The second, more pragmatic interpretation stresses that, due to exceptionally large numbers, competition among Arab youth has become higher than ever before. However, the context in which competition operates is being radically altered by a declining birth rate.

For the first time, young adults are freed from family constraints. They are at the same time freed from the burden of numerous children (their own fertility is low), and not yet confronted with the burden of an aging population (their mothers' fertility was high). The Arab world thus stands at a turning point: a former society of families is giving way to a society of individuals who are, for the first time, exceptionally mobile because they are no longer restrained by the familial responsibilities of their predecessors.

Well-educated young Arabs, now partly freed from the family constraints of the past, have high expectations. But these expectations come up against serious obstacles such as unemployment or underpaid and undervalued jobs, generating deep frustration and economic dissatisfaction.

A widening discrepancy between knowledge and power generates an even deeper political frustration: while the educational gap should give growing prominence to young generations that are increasingly better educated than old generations, the patriarchal system that concentrates power in the hands of old generations still prevails in economic and political spheres. The present Arab rulers (or their fathers) were already in place when many of the young people currently protesting in the streets were born.

Thus, soaring human capital among Arab youth brings with it the potential for progress, but also for protest.

Migration and Protest

Turning to Albert Hirschman's theory of response to deteriorating conditions, given the choice between "exit," "voice," and "loyalty," showing loyalty (or, more precisely, silencing complaints) has historically been the dominant response in Arab populations. Recall that these populations, until recently, were made up of families themselves organized by an immemorial patriarchal system, i.e., a system of submission by the young to their elders.

But demographic changes and the subsequent emergence of individuals enjoying, from a family perspective, unprecedented freedom of movement, have opened the door to risk taking. As a result, young people first exited, and they now voice.

The exit response — emigration — had been widespread across the Arab region for the last half of the 20th century (apart from Libya and the oil-rich countries of the Gulf that are, instead, major receivers of migrants).

Twenty million nationals from Arab states currently live outside their countries of origin. Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen are major senders, with between 5 and 20 percent of their nationals currently living abroad. In Morocco and Tunisia, specifically, this proportion has doubled since 1995, and a culture of emigration has developed throughout the Middle East and North African region.

Large-scale surveys have found that 15 percent of young Egyptians and 25 percent young Moroccans contemplate emigrating. Perhaps more telling is the growth in the proportion of Tunisians who have considered emigrating; from 22 percent in 1996 to 45 percent in 2000, and a dramatic 76 percent in 2005. Such a high proportion conveys a lot about the extent of dissatisfaction among young Tunisians at a time when revolution was not yet on the agenda.

Protest — the 'voice' response to mounting frustration — had often gone hand in hand with migration before it began to truly flare up over the last several months. North African governments long distrusted their migrant communities in Europe, suspecting them of being centers of political opposition, before coming to court them for their remittances.

A survey of highly skilled Algerian expatriates in Canada showed that political, rather than economic, conditions were the true reason behind their not returning to Algeria, which they would only do if a democratic regime respectful of individual freedoms were established. And the Syrian government has entrusted its Ministry for Expatriate Affairs with organizing the Syrian diaspora in such a way that migrant voices would sell, rather than denounce, the ruling regime.

Moreover, recent revolts have themselves found spokesmen from Arab expatriate communities in Europe and elsewhere. In fact, Wael Ghoneim, a young executive expatriate living in the Gulf, contributed to the organization of Cairo's Tahrir Square protesters through Facebook and is an icon of Egypt's Revolution.

Arab revolt is not limited to migrant-sending states, however. Migrant-receiving states — Bahrain, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia — are also the scenes of major movements of protest. In each of their cases there is also a link between revolt and migration, but of a different kind.

Oil-rich Arab countries have gone through radical changes since the various oil crises of the 1990s and 2000s (and an international embargo in the case of Libya) affected the capacity of governments to subsidize national populations, both in terms of standards of living and employment. Private employers' economic preference for migrant workers has always been stronger than states' policies for the indigenization of the workforce.

While Gulf nationals were experiencing unemployment, immigrants came to be viewed as competitors and, in some cases, were scapegoated. In Libya, massive deportations of migrants and refugees — sometimes accompanied by anti-immigrant riots — have occurred again and again in the last two decades under the pretext that migrants were a

threat to national security.

Latent tensions between nationals and immigrants have resurfaced with the current revolts. In Bahrain, where the demographic majority is Shiite and political power is held by a Sunni monarchy, one claim of Shiite protesters was that naturalized immigrants from Pakistan and some Arab countries, all of them Sunnis, should be deprived of their newly acquired Bahraini citizenship. Immigrants from India and Bangladesh are also rumored to have been forcibly enrolled in pro-government rallies. In Libya, government forces have allegedly recruited fighters and mercenaries among African immigrants in the country, some of them by force.

Will Arab Revolts Further Impact Migration?

In predominantly migrant-sending states, popular revolts might conceivably produce a variety of migratory outcomes according to their political and socioeconomic outcomes. Where revolts culminate with the establishment of governments that are responsive to the peoples' demands and instill trust, one can expect a movement of return migration from the diaspora to take place, provided that economic conditions also become favorable.

Such a movement may take some time to start, as was the case with Turkey after the country's political stabilization and economic boom in the late 1990s. At the time of writing, these conditions have not yet happened in any Arab country.

The opposite result, a continuation or amplification of the emigration movement, must be expected where revolts stall and do not respond to aspirations of economic security and, just as importantly, of freedom.

What immediate impact the revolts have had on emigration from migrant-sending states is unclear but, at the time of writing, a scenario of mass migration in response to political unrest seems unlikely. So far, only Tunisia has experienced a surge of emigration, with some 25,000 irregular migrants having landed on the southern Italian island of Lampedusa in the first three months of 2011. In Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, no similar movement has occurred, and the topic of emigration has simply disappeared from the mainstream media.

What makes Tunisia special is the proximity of Europe (giving would-be migrants the impression — the wrong impression, as it happens — that the Italian shore is within reach); a common border with Libya from where waves of migrants are currently fleeing the war; and a dramatic wish to emigrate that predated the revolt.

In predominantly migrant-receiving states, it is not the outcomes of the revolts that will most impact migration, but instead the immediate reality of the protests themselves and their repression by states.

When the revolt first broke out in Libya in mid-February 2011, the country was host to 1 million or more migrants mainly from Egypt, Tunisia, and sub-Saharan Africa. As of May 5, a recorded 720,609 migrants have fled insecurity in the country as a result of the revolt, the vast majority crossing Libya's land borders with Tunisia and Egypt. The scenario of the First Gulf War between 1990 and 1991, during which time 3 million migrant workers and their families were suddenly driven into exile, is being repeated in Libya.

Europe has swiftly responded to the emergency situation and, in the hope of avoiding an influx of irregular migrants in Mediterranean Europe, has extended efforts to help migrants stranded in Libya return to their home countries in Africa. The European Commission's Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) and the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders (Frontex) have been mobilized for these purposes.

Several hundreds of Tunisian migrants attempted to use visas that were granted by Italy to enter France, triggering a quarrel between the two countries and a push to revise the Schengen agreement, which establishes a border-free zone throughout most of Europe.

It is of critical importance in this case to look closely at the numbers: out of more than 700,000 migrants displaced by events in the western Arab states of North Africa, around

30,000 (4 to 5 percent) have attempted to reach Europe. This is enormous in proportion to the size of the Italian island where they first entered Europe, but much less significant considering the size of the Schengen area. The other 95 percent have headed mainly for African and Asian destinations.

Beyond addressing the fear of receiving unwanted immigrants, Europe must listen to what young people have been repeatedly demanding in the streets of Arab cities, from Tunis to Sana'a and from Cairo to Damascus: they want freedom at home. Not a single revolt has centered on securing free entry into Europe.

Focusing on migration, whether actually or hypothetically resulting from the Arab revolts, is not enough. Europe must also address the political roots of this migration. Many hold the West partly accountable for antidemocratic rulers and regimes remaining in office indefinitely in Arab countries. European states supported the stability of established regimes in order secure access to Arab oil and maintain the fragile status quo of a highly sensitive region lying in the immediate neighborhood of Europe.

Moreover, containing irregular migration by subcontracting to North African governments the control of entry into the Schengen area has led Europe to look away from human-rights violations. Until revolt shook Libya, Colonel Gaddafi was regarded by European states as a responsible partner for policing migration so much so that, in the first days of the uprising in his country, he was able to confidently warn that "thousands of African migrants will invade Europe if there is nobody to stop them in Libya."

The Arab revolts offer Europe an unprecedented opportunity to deal on equal footing with democracies in its southern neighborhood. This prospect requires that Europe recognize the mistakes of the past, including those made in the name of its migration policies.

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MPI • 1400 16th St. NW, Suite 300 • Washington, DC 20036
ph: (001) 202-266-1940 • fax: (001) 202-266-1900
source@migrationpolicy.org