Was the Arab Spring a false one?

December 14 2012

he Arab Spring has turned to winter. A year after protests, demonstrations and uprisings rocked the Arab world, hopes for peaceful transitions and free elections are fading in Egypt, Libya, and especially Syria, while elsewhere repression is the rule.

In Benghazi, Cairo, Damascus and Aleppo, the students, teachers, farmers, merchants and rebels who embodied the Arab Spring are wondering if they"ve only succeeded in trading one evil for another: militias that cannot and will not stop the sectarian violence that killed an American ambassador; an elected president who has suddenly and shockingly placed himself above the law; and a brutal regime willing to commit whatever atrocities it takes to hold onto power. How can this be?

The New England Complex Systems Institute explains how in a new paper, "Complexity and the Limits of Revolution: What Will Happen to the Arab Spring?" While the ongoing unrest encompassed by the Arab Spring has triggered long-awaited reforms and toppled dictators who ruled for decades, the authors insist immediate change is neither easy nor guaranteed. Hopes that repressive regimes will quickly be followed by democracies is unreasonable at best.

Authors Alexander S. Gard-Murray and Yaneer Bar-Yam provide a complex systems framework, validated by historical precedent, to help explain the dynamics of government change in the region. Their empirical support makes use of data on the outcomes of unrest and governmental changes from 1945 to 2000.

"What is happening now is not unlike [biological evolution](#)," said NECSI president Yaneer Bar-Yam, "in which complex organizations arise by replication, variation and competitive selection. Without a simpler organism to build on, a more complex one can't form."

Revolutions may disrupt existing complexity, limiting the potential for building new complex structures quickly. In fact, the authors argue, democracy is harder to create in the wake of unrest than in the wake of autocracy. Revolutions disrupt the complex web of dependencies within governments and between them and other institutions, making it more likely that simpler systems—such as autocracy—will result, rather than complex ones such as democracy.

"Constructing a theory of governmental change from the perspective of complex systems," said Bar-Yam, "can explain and perhaps anticipate the outcomes of revolutions, as it is an added perspective that synthesizes and extends existing theories about the role that violence, institutions, and time play in revolutions."

The authors express hope that a better understanding of the difficulties that revolutions create for post-revolutionary governments can guide regional and global responses to social unrest. "Building a successful government begins, rather than ends, with the revolution," said Bar-Yam.

More information: necsi.edu/research/social/revolutions/

Provided by New England Complex Systems Institute

Citation: Was the Arab Spring a false one? (2012, December 14) retrieved 11 May 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2012-12-arab-false.html