

Opinion

'Arab Spring': Notes for a study

By Edwin Madunagu

THE following notes are fragmentary. The analyses and propositions, which they may embody, are therefore tentative. As the citing of all the sources will be too cumbersome I shall cite only obscure ones, leaving out those that can be obtained by a quick Internet search. The piece itself may be taken as continuation of the exercise begun with *Revolution and humanism: Clarifications*. (March 29 and April 5, 2012).

We may begin with definition, description and range: *Arab Spring* refers to the democratic uprisings that arose independently and spread across the Arab world in 2011. The movement originated in December 2010 and quickly took hold in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan". This is straightforward, clear and precise. The *Source Watch* article from which it was taken then added what I expect every student of the subject to know, namely, that the term, *Arab Spring*, "was previously used beginning in March 2005 by numerous media commentators to suggest that a spin-off benefit of the invasion of Iraq would be the flowering of Western-friendly Middle East democracies".

Put differently, the term, *Arab Spring*, is not a new name for a new development, but an old name that was previously given to a political illusion - that the 2003 American invasion of Iraq would spark of a "democracy wind" in Arab-majority countries of Africa and the Middle East. Mind you, not just democracy; but democracy that would be "Western-friendly" by which is meant "imperialist-aligned". The 2003 illusion died, as it was fated to die. Seven years later the self-immolation of a young Tunisian man, Boazizi, sparked a fire which is still burning and which is more appropriately called the *Arab Spring*.

I wish to digress. I think it is appropriate for me to repeat, here, a point which I frequently make in this column: The term, "West", as used in the media, carries multiple meanings and connotations. It may mean a concrete *geopolitical entity* whose history can be traced as far back as we wish. It may also mean a *culture*, which has a similar historical attribute. Then, the term "West" may mean *imperialism*, which, since the

18th century, has been *capitalist, or predominantly capitalist*. Since the term "West" is so important in contemporary political discussion and is so misunderstood, my advice is that a writer or communicator should always ensure that the context in which he or she uses the term is clear in each instance. If in doubt of your own clarity, explain - even if in parenthesis.

Back to the track. Someone who may one day be introduced to the world as an "expert" or "authority" on *Arab Spring* presented the following as *causes* of the revolutionary wave: "Demographic structural causes; authoritarian states; extreme poverty; government corruption; human rights violations; inflation; kleptocracy; sectarianism; unemployment". Of the nine causes listed, seven may be classified as easily understood - provided you bear in mind that "experts" on the state usually draw distinctions between "authoritarian", "totalitarian" and "autocratic" in order to be able to give the less odious labels to their notorious friends or notorious friends of their principals. I am bringing out two causes, "demographic structural factors" and "sectarianism" for brief comments.

My problem with sectarianism is that I don't know - since I have not accessed the full article where explanations may be found - if the term refers, in this context, to the embattled or fallen regimes, or the ruling classes, or the masses and their organisations, or, indeed, the Arabs as a race! As for "demographic structural factors", we can guess the meaning, but the author simply has to say more - to avoid mystification. But, unfortunately, I could not also obtain any elaboration from my Internet source. While still trying to obtain the full article, I am assuming that the author of the listed causes is aware that since we are discussing a single social phenomenon, the aspects do overlap, that is, flow into one another. However, the main thing to which I want to draw attention in the listing above is what I may call fatal omissions. Factors omitted include *dependency* (that is, the "absence of national independence); economic system; and social inequality".

The last point can never be overstated: You will not even begin to understand the Arab Spring without considering and appreciating grossly exploitative economic system or structure, socio-economic inequality and national dependency as

key causative factors. I am making this point not to satisfy my "ideological fancy". The omitted factors I have listed were actually voiced in the "Arab Spring" and formed part of its national platforms. I was on the lookout for them; and I saw and heard them. They were not added for completeness or as appendages. Put differently, these omitted factors, and demands arising from them, were integrated into each of the national platforms of the Arab Spring and put forward by definite and substantial political tendencies - the *Revolutionary Left*, in particular. These tendencies were present and very active in each of the national theatres of the Arab Spring. But "experts" would like to sanitise both the tendencies and their banners from the "Arab Spring".

From "causes" we go to what the unnamed "expert" or "authority" saw as the "goals" of Arab Spring. Four were listed: Democracy, human rights, free and fair elections, and regime change. Our comment here flows from what has been said on "causes". Absent from the list of "goals" are national independence, disengagement from neoliberal capitalism and capitalist imperialism, human rights of women and, generally, the negation of the "causes" listed earlier. The writer listed the following as "characteristics" of Arab Spring: "Civil disobedience, civil resistance, defection, demonstrations, online activism, protest camps, rebellion, revolution, riots, self-immolations, strike actions, uprising, urban warfare."

I have two points to make on the issue of characteristics. First, I don't know why the writer fails to be explicit on the question of armed rebellion. In other words, although the writer uses terms, which suggest armed rebellion, I wonder why she or he does not say so explicitly. The arming of a rebellion raises the stakes and re-defines or re-orders the objectives. Two: The writer lists uprising, rebellion, urban warfare and revolution separately. I hope this suggests that she or he believes that there is a difference between the first three and the last: 'revolution'.

The author also summarised what he called the "status" or "outcome" of the revolt in each national theatre as at the time I obtained this material from the Internet (March 24, 2012). This cannot be contentious because we can see

and hear the situation in each "Arab Spring" country. I therefore have nothing against the summaries or "outcomes" given by the writer provided it is always borne in mind that each national "outcome" is not the result of a straight combat between the regime and a monolithic "opposition", but the result of clashes of several socio-political forces including the regime, the democratic forces, religious forces, feminist groups, revolutionary Left and, of course, imperialism. The opposition was, of course, united at certain levels, but not at all levels. I recall what Leon Trotsky advised in an "Arab Spring"-like situation: "March separately, but strike together. Agree on where to strike and when to strike".

Furthermore, I would have used the expression "balance of forces," rather than "status" or "outcome", because the situation in each national theatre is dynamic, still unfolding. Another writer has noted the following important point: In some theatres, the "Spring" moved from the urban to the rural areas; in others the movement was in the opposite direction. In at least one country the movement was from a particular region to the rest of the country.

Suppose I am asked to produce my own list of causal factors, goals, characteristics and results, what will I set down? I shall first of all discard these categories. I shall then suggest the following areas for a study of the Arab Spring: Definition, description, and range; historical antecedents (for example, the 1919 "wave"); common or shared historical experience; immediate causal factors; the role of culture and religion, particularly Islam; socio-political forces in the combat; organisation and structure of revolt; role of the state army; role of the social media (SM); demands and platforms; role of imperialism; balance of forces - generally and in each national theatre; lessons.

In the concluding segment of these notes, I shall make general comments on the areas listed above. But I end this segment with the following observation: In none of the national theatres of Arab Spring has the minimum democratic demands been met in full. On the contrary, to imperialism or the "international community", the minimum democratic demands have long been met in all the national theatres - except in Syria.

• *To be concluded.*

Opinion

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In the opening segment of these notes, I suggested a breakdown of the subject – “Arab Spring” – into the following areas: Definition, description and range; historical antecedents; common historical experience; immediate causal factors; role of culture and religion, particularly Islam, socio-political forces in combat; organisation and structure of revolt; role of the state army; role of social media (SM); demands and platforms; role of imperialism; balance of forces – generally and in each national theatre; and lessons.

Inadvertently omitted from this list is what I may call the role of “external forces”, including the United Nations, the African Union, the Arab League and individual “heavy-weight” countries. I may need to re-state that I differentiate the *United Nations from International Community*. The latter, as I have insisted, is, in some contexts, another name for *imperialism*. Furthermore, although the human cost of the Arab Spring would run through the entire course of any study, it is so heavy that it deserves to be treated separately.

As a young revolutionary in the middle and late 1970s, I was attracted and deeply influenced by the story of the Algerian War of Independence, and, particularly, by the role of the armed vanguard of the Algerian people – the National Liberation Front (FNL). It was the same type of interest I had earlier developed in the story of Vietnam, and the Vietnamese armed vanguard. What interested me most, in both Algeria and Vietnam, was that in each case, a colonised people, under the leadership of their armed vanguard, rose against their colonial oppressors and forced them to withdraw. Algeria, however, presented an additional point of interest: The role of Islam in the mobilisation, resistance and heroism of the people in the liberation struggle that was simultaneously anti-colonial, anti-imperialist and socialist. I think it was Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the earth*, which first brought the role of Islam in Algeria's liberation war to my notice.

Later, Amílcar Cabral, a Marxist theoretician and revolutionary fighter (Guinea Bissau) was to widen my horizon on the revolutionary po-

tential of culture, generally. This horizon was further widened by the exploits of Camillo Torres, the Latin American Catholic priest who took up arms against imperialism and neo-colonial capitalism. If I had not had this specific knowledge of the role of religion and culture in authentic revolutions of the people I would have had peculiar difficulties in understanding the current “Arab Spring”. I am sure many people – especially from my own background – would have had, or are still having difficulties in understanding the religious and cultural factor and may be tempted either to ignore it or give it an essentially negative or reactionary role. This will be missing the road.

It is, however, important to note that what we see wherever religion and culture have played significant roles in a political struggle is a ‘particular interpretation’ of that religion or culture and not the religion or culture in general. We remember, for instance, that in Columbia and elsewhere in Latin America the Catholic Church hierarchy condemned the Catholic armed rebels, together with their doctrines, including the “liberation theology” and the “Church of the poor.” But these rebels believed very fervently that they were giving correct interpretations of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ.

When, sometimes ago, I was discussing the “Arab Spring” with a young, but well-educated friend of mine, he said that my view on *armed politics* was “Machiavellian”. What I said to warrant this label was that the state is always and everywhere an armed institution, ready – at all times, not just in the final analysis – to defend itself with arms. Hence, any group who plans to remove or overawe or radically transform a state by means other than the process prescribed by the state itself must arm itself. But if somehow the group succeeds in overthrowing the state or the government by “peaceful” means, it must immediately thereafter arm itself. That does not make me a Machiavellian. We agreed that I should touch on Machiavelli when appreciating the Arab Spring in this column.

I have never been an admirer of Nicolo Machiavelli, the 16th century Italian political philosopher and public servant. But my near-dislike of him is not like that of political hypocrites whose reaction to Machiavelli is borne out of embarrassment for being told what they are in

reality or being shown a mirror to see themselves for what they are in reality. I do not admire the man not because his conclusions and perceptions of power were wrong – far from it – but because he was a philosophical cynic who ignored, or was ignorant of the presence of dialectics in human relations and consciousness, and rather, approached social and historical sciences strictly with the method of natural science. But revolutionaries are dialectical in thought and action, and are not cynics. They recognise social reality, but fight to change it, not exploit it.

I first encountered Machiavelli when I was reading Isaac Deutscher's three-volume biography of Leon Trotsky: *The prophet armed*; *The prophet unarmed*; and *The prophet outcast*. The author used a well-known passage from the sixth chapter of Machiavelli's *The prince* as an epigraph. The passage reads in part: “Hence it is that all armed prophets have conquered, and the unarmed ones have been destroyed.”

I have made reference to this particular passage a couple of times. The occasion I remembered very vividly now was my tribute to Ken Saro-Wiwa in November 1996 on the first anniversary of his judicial murder. I titled the piece, *Prophet without arms*. It first appeared in the now-rested *Sunday Concord* and was later incorporated into *The making and unmaking of Nigeria*. Beyond this, this column, on October 24, 2004, carried the article *Boro-Saro Wiwa-Dokubo*. The latter article ended this way: “Three young men, among many others, had in the last 40 years, been thrown up to prominence in the Niger Delta self-determination struggle: Isaac Boro, Ken Saro-Wiwa and Dokubo Asari. The first and the third led armed struggles against the Nigerian state. They escaped with their lives and were later reconciled with the state. The second, an intellectual, preached and practiced non-violent protest. But he lost his life in the hands of the state”.

Now, we may return to the Arab Spring and to the current *balance of forces*. In Tunisia, the uprising was largely unarmed; the state army at a stage could no longer defend the regime under President Ben Ali; the President fled the country and his government fell; but the state

remained intact. In Egypt, the uprising was largely unarmed; at a stage the army could no longer defend President Hosni Mubarak's government; the government fell; but the state remained intact. In Libya, the protest became armed early in its life; it grew into a civil war with massive external military intervention; Muammar Gaddafi's regime was overthrown, the man himself was killed and the Libyan state was completely smashed.

In Yemen, the uprising was armed right from the beginning; it assumed a civil war dimension around the capital; the government of President Ali Abdullah was almost overthrown, but the American administration was not in support of radical overthrow; the president handed over power to a “national unity government”; the state remained intact. In Syria, the uprising became armed after several months of very costly peaceful demonstration; despite several defections, the army still appears solidly behind the regime; external military intervention, through the United Nations was favoured by the Arab League, America and European Union, but is blocked by Russia and China. In Bahrain, the uprising was largely unarmed; even then the regime requested and obtained military support from the Gulf states; despite cosmetic changes the state remains intact and solid.

Finally, the “external forces”. Ordinarily the International Community, should be the human community on this planet Earth. The leading or primary organisation of this community would then be the United Nations. Other organisations include the European Union, the African Union, the Association of South East Asia Nations, the ECOWAS, Arab League, NATO, the BRICS, and other regional and even bilateral formations, ideological or non-ideological. So, when I reject the current dominant notion of the “International Community”, I do not mean that the term has no meaning. What I mean is that the current usage is an ideological appropriation of a name and meaning by imperialism. The main external forces in this “Spring” separate into the United Nations, individual friends and foes, the African Union, Arab League, and imperialism, or the “International Community” as it calls itself. As soon as we make this separation, their different roles will appear before our eyes.

• *Concluded.*