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The Global Context

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Abstract

The revolts that have been sweeping the Arab world during 2011 have already had a dramatic impact on global perceptions of the fortunes of democracy. These uprisings broke out at a moment when democracy seemed to be mired in a period of decline. Have the events in the Arab world been a “game-changer,” reversing what had merely been a short-lived downturn in the fortunes of democracy and prefiguring a new period of global democratic progress? Or did the growing strength of authoritarian regimes prior to 2011 reveal the real underlying trend, from which we have been momentarily distracted by the exciting and dramatic developments we have been watching unfold in the Middle East?

Comparing the Arab Revolts

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Marc F. Plattner

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The ultimate outcome of the revolts that have been sweeping the Arab world during 2011 remains almost impossible to predict, yet they have already had a dramatic impact on global perceptions of the fortunes of democracy. These uprisings broke out at a moment when democracy seemed to be mired in a period of decline. After the extraordinary progress that democracy had achieved during the last quarter of the twentieth century—what Samuel P. Huntington had famously labeled the “third wave” of democratization—it was perhaps inevitable that its global advance would falter.

That is what finally happened during the first decade of our current century. There was no reverse wave on the scale that Huntington had identified in earlier epochs, but signs of democratic decline did begin to appear in the annual Freedom House survey *Freedom in the World* for 2006.¹ Discouraging evidence mounted over the succeeding years, and the survey for 2010 reported a fifth straight year of decline, with the number of electoral democracies in the world having shrunk to 115 (from a high of 123) and the number of countries designated as Free having shrunk to 87 (from a high of 90).²

Moreover, nondemocratic countries had increasingly begun cooperating with one another and displaying a new level of confidence and assertiveness. The final months of 2010 alone, as the narrative accompanying the Freedom House survey pointed out, witnessed China’s efforts to counter the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to dissident intellectual Liu Xiaobo through diplomatic intimidation and crackdowns on domestic critics; blatantly rigged parliamentary elections in Hosni Mubarak’s

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