

The Arab Spring

By Encyclopedia Britannica, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.14.17

Word Count 1,198

Level 1020L



Egyptians wave the national flag in Cairo's Tahrir Square during a rally marking the anniversary of the 2011 Arab Spring uprising on January 25, 2014. AFP Photo/Virginie Nguyen Hoang

The Arab Spring refers to the wave of pro-democracy protests that took place in the Middle East and North Africa beginning in 2010 and 2011. They challenged some of the region's long-standing authoritarian governments. These governments put many restrictions on their citizens, such as lack of freedom of speech. In some countries, the government controlled all forms of media. Many protesters expressing their concerns faced violent crackdowns.

In January and February 2011, protests erupted in Tunisia and Egypt. In a few weeks, they succeeded in overthrowing two governments thought to be among the region's most stable.

Tunisia

The first demonstrations took place in central Tunisia in December 2010. They started after a 26-year-old street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi burned himself alive to protest his treatment by local officials. A protest movement, dubbed the "Jasmine Revolution" in the media, quickly spread through the country.

The Tunisian government attempted to end the unrest. It offered the protesters some of what they wanted, but they also used violence against them. Protests soon became overwhelming, and Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali stepped down and fled the country in January 2011. A democratically chosen president and prime minister took office in December 2011.

Egypt

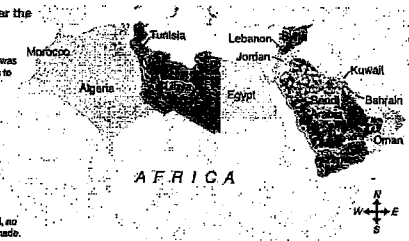
Massive protests broke out in late January 2011, only days after Ben Ali left Tunisia. The Egyptian government tried using similar tactics as the Tunisian government, but they failed. A turning point came when the Egyptian army announced that it would refuse to use force against protesters. President Hosni Mubarak left office February 11 after nearly 30 years in power. He handed power over to a council of senior military officers.

Initially, much of the public was satisfied. The new military administration enjoyed high public approval. However, optimism was eventually dampened. The new administration appeared hesitant to begin a full transfer of power to an elected government, and military forces resumed the use of violence against protesters. Confrontations between protesters and government forces became frequent. Some became violent. Still, parliamentary elections proceeded as scheduled. The newly elected People's Assembly held its inaugural session in late January 2012.

The aftermath of the uprisings is still unfolding. After a group called the Muslim Brotherhood won elections in 2012, many in the country were hopeful. Newly-elected President Mohamed Morsi appointed a former military officer, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, as his defense minister. But one year into Morsi's presidency, another round of huge protests broke out. After protesters demanded that Morsi step down, al-Sisi led a coup d'etat to remove Morsi from office, taking over the presidency himself.

What happened after the Arab Spring?

- Government was overthrown and there was a successful transition to democracy.
- Government was overthrown and the new government is still developing.
- Government was not overthrown, but changes were made.
- Fighting a civil war.
- Protests were stopped, no major changes were made.



Even though the situation spiraled into chaos, many in the region saw the initial uprisings that brought down Ben Ali and Mubarak to be huge successes. Others around the Middle East were inspired. Between January and March 2011, protest movements took hold in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya, and Syria. However, these protests led to long bloody struggles.

Yemen

The first protests appeared in late January 2011. They called for President Ali Abdullah Saleh to step down. Negotiations failed, and there were clashes in the largest city. In November 2011, Saleh signed an agreement calling for a transfer of power to the vice president, Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi. Hadi took over governing responsibility immediately and formally assumed the presidency in February 2012. An election was held, but Hadi was the only candidate on the ballot.

However, political transition has not gone smoothly. Fighting soon broke out between a number of factions, including Houthi rebels and fighters linked to the terrorist group Al Qaeda. Houthi rebels are supported by Iran and gained notoriety by discussing political and religious issues in Yemeni media. Hadi resigned in 2015 and eventually fled to Saudi Arabia. Houthi rebels declared that they would control the government, while Saudi Arabia began airstrikes against the Houthis. The Houthis have aligned with people loyal to former President Saleh. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia is trying to restore Hadi as Yemen's leader.

Even before fighting broke out, around half of the people in Yemen were living in poverty. Early in 2017, millions in the country faced starvation.

Bahrain

Mass protests demanding reforms erupted in mid-February 2011. They were led by Bahraini human rights activists. Many were Shiites, who follow a type of Islam called Shia Islam. Though Shiites are the majority in Bahrain, they are discriminated against by a smaller Sunni minority. The country is ruled by a Sunni monarchy.

Protests were violently suppressed and ended by March 2011. After the protests, dozens of accused protest leaders were imprisoned, hundreds of Shiite workers suspected of supporting the protests were fired, and dozens of Shiite mosques were demolished by the government. In November 2011, an independent

investigation into the uprising concluded that the government had used excessive force and torture against protesters. The government vowed to make changes, and Shiites still protest for more rights.

Libya

Protests against Muammar al-Qaddafi began in mid-February 2011. Qaddafi was a dictator who ruled Libya for more than 40 years.

They quickly escalated into an armed revolt. An international coalition launched a campaign to help the rebels. It was led by the North American Treaty Organization (NATO), a military alliance of North American and European countries. The United States, under President Barack Obama, participated.

Qaddafi was forced from power in August 2011 after rebel forces took control of the capital, Tripoli. He evaded capture for several weeks. However, Qaddafi was killed in October 2011 as rebel forces took control of the city.

After Qaddafi's death, an internationally recognized temporary government took power. It was called the Transitional National Council (TNC). The TNC struggled to restart the Libyan economy and establish functional institutions of government. It also had difficulty controlling the many small independent armies that had participated in the rebellion against Qaddafi. A number of armed groups continue vying for control over parts of Libya.

Syria

Protests calling for the resignation of President Bashar al-Assad broke out in mid-March 2011. They spread throughout the country. Assad responded with a brutal crackdown against protesters. A leadership council for the Syrian opposition formed in August, and opposition groups began to launch attacks on government forces. Still, Assad's hold on power appeared strong, as he was able to keep the support of critical military units composed largely of members of Syria's Alawite minority, to which Assad also belonged. Alawites follow a type of Islam called Alawi Islam.

Divisions in the international community made it unlikely that international military intervention would be possible. Russia and China vowed to oppose any measure that would lead to foreign intervention in Syria or Assad's removal from power. The Civil War that has gone on since 2011 has led to a huge influx of refugees to neighboring countries and Europe.

Effects of the Arab Spring

The effects of the Arab Spring movement were felt elsewhere throughout the Middle East and North Africa. Many of the countries in the region experienced at least minor pro-democracy protests. In Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, rulers offered a variety of changes to prevent the spread of protest movements in their countries. They ranged from the dismissal of unpopular officials to constitutional changes.