

# The Arab Spring and its legacy

**Events:** On 17 December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian market trader who lived in Sidi Bouzid, some 300 km south of the capital Tunis, set fire to himself in protest against the confiscation of his cart and produce and his treatment by the police. Bouaziz died on 4 January 2011. This incident is often credited with having sparked the wave of protests in Tunisia which, on 14 January, led to the removal of President Ben Ali, after 24 years in power. Inspired by events in Tunisia, Egyptian demonstrators took to the streets on 25 January, calling for the removal of President Hosni Mubarak. Under growing pressure from the Egyptian military, and as protests escalated, Mubarak resigned on 11 February. In Libya, demonstrations quickly led to an armed uprising and a civil war, in which rebel forces were supported by NATO aerial attacks, the capture and killing of Muammar Gaddafi on 22 October effectively signalling the collapse of his regime. The following month, Ali Abdullah Saleh agreed to step down as Yemeni president, formerly ceding power in February 2012. In Syria, protests that started in March 2011 against President Bashar Assad developed, over succeeding months, into a highly complex and intractable civil war.

**Significance:** The protest movements that swept through much of North Africa and parts of the Middle East in 2011 were quickly dubbed the 'Arab Spring'. These rebellions have nevertheless unleashed a complex range of forces, meaning that debate about the significance of the Arab Spring may continue for many years. At least four interpretations have been advanced, although none is likely to be persuasive on its own. In the first, the Arab Spring is seen as the 'Arab world's 1989', the beginning of its transition from authoritarianism to sustainable democracy. The overthrow of at least four dictators and the holding of the Arab world's first free and fair elections, in Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco in late 2011 and early 2012, help to support this view. However, democratization requires a process of consolidation through which key groups and interests (including those linked to the old regime) are reconciled to the new, democratic 'rules of the game'. In the case of the Arab Spring, this applies particularly to the military and the Muslim Brotherhood (in whatever form), and, as



Mohamed Morsi's short and controversial presidency in Egypt demonstrated, the reconciliation of neither group can be taken for granted.

In the second interpretation, the Arab Spring has sparked a resurgence of political Islam. Despite their initial marginalization, Brotherhood-linked groups were bolstered by the Arab Spring, both because it led to the lifting of restrictions on their political activities and because the introduction of elections provided them, by virtue of their level of organization and the appeal of religion, with a sure route to power. However, as once again shown by developments in Morsi's Egypt, attempts by Brotherhood-linked parties to advance an Islamist agenda may weaken their public support and leave them politically vulnerable.

In the third interpretation, the Arab Spring has been seen as a brief interlude before the (inevitable) return of dictatorship to the Arab world. In this view, the divisions and instability provoked by the Arab Spring have merely underlined the importance of the military as the only reliable source of political order, and created opportunities for it to re-enter politics sooner or later, claiming to be the 'nation's saviour'. In the fourth interpretation, the Arab Spring has significantly strengthened divisions in the Arab and wider Muslim world between Sunni and Shi'a forms of Islam. Although the flames of this conflict were lit in Iraq, they have burned most fiercely during the Syrian civil war, which can be seen as a 'proxy war' between Sunni Muslims and Shi'a Muslims, ultimately for control of the Middle East.