

The Future of the Arab Spring: Civic Entrepreneurship in Politics, Art, and Technology Startups

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*Oxford, UK and Waltham, MA: Butterworth-
Heinemann, 2013. 124 pages.*

The Arab Spring, which began in December 2010, mobilized the Arab masses to depose once-uncontestable autocratic rulers. Many observers predicted that this regional uprising would move the Arab world from autocracy to democracy in no time. However, the present scenario speaks to the contrary. Although many are struggling to understand its long-term effects, one thing is certain: This ongoing event has engendered a significant change in the people's sociopolitical awareness. Consequently, many writers have approached it from various social, political, economic, and religious aspects.

The book under review seeks to examine and explore this subject through a unique and different aspect: the contribution of "civic entrepre-

neurship,” defined as an innovative, non-violent, and peaceful “citizen-driven effort to mobilize communities to respond to opportunities or crises in order to advance the collective good” (p. 2). In its seven chapters, the author emphasizes the revolution’s non-violent roots under three main sections: “Civic Entrepreneurship in Politics and Society, Civic Entrepreneurship in Art and Culture, and Civic Entrepreneurship in Technology Startups” (p. 3). The first three chapters attempt to form the theoretical foundation for her main argument.

Chapter 1, “Introduction,” informs the readers of the book’s goals and objectives and presents its framework. Here, Jamshidi tries to bring forth the “meaning, import, and practical significance of civic entrepreneurship during the Arab Spring” (p. 3). According to her, “both in the short and long term” the burgeoning of civic entrepreneurship has “made the Arab Spring a truly unique and unprecedented phenomenon,” (p. 2) for this type of entrepreneurship characterizes a powerful weapon and important shield for protecting and defending the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region’s recent gains. Moreover, these “peaceful, collective, and popular initiatives” “hold the promise of a better future, if and when the fighting ends” (pp. 3, 5).

Chapter 2, “A Short History of the Arab World and the Arab Spring,” traces the decades-old “never-ending cycle of autocracy, oppression, corruption, and economic stagnation” (p. 5) that has engulfed most of the MENA region. The increasing costs of staple commodities led to regional “bread riots” during the early 1980s (p. 6). Moreover, “neo-liberal economic policies” resulted in the region’s economic dependence on international monetary institutions, a reality that the United States and its European allies fully exploited. After this, the author deals briefly with the spark that set off the current chain of events: “Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year old Tunisian fruit seller from the impoverished city of Sidi Bouzid, set himself on fire” (p. 8). The popular outrage soon spread to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, where it has claimed hundreds and thousands of lives so far.

Chapter 3, “Revolution, Ideology, and Democracy,” revisits the mainstream perceptions of these terms and argues “why these trends fail to accurately capture the Arab Spring” (p. 23). The author states that the Arab Spring actually reformulated and revitalized these concepts. Furthermore, Jamshidi contends with those who, on the basis of a “theory of revolution,” refused to classify the Arab Spring as such. In fact, she argues that the “grassroots transformations occurring in Arab Spring countries strongly suggest that the re-

gion” is passing through a continued revolution and “a complete political, social, and economic overhaul is on the horizon” (p. 26). And yet she sees very few similarities between earlier historical revolutions and the Arab Spring “revolution.” She also argues with those who believe that the Arab Spring is non-ideological, asserting that religion played no role in the uprising. I strongly disagree with this position on the grounds that if MENA’s cultural and traditional roots are linked with the Arab Spring, as she states in chapter 5, then how can one leave out the centuries-long religious roots of the region’s people? However, Jamshidi believes that “an ethic of responsibility” (p. 29) (viz., freedom, justice, dignity, unity, and accountability) was the main key factor right from the beginning. Regarding the present situation, she writes that democracy “symbolizes little more than party politics” (p. 40). The uniqueness of the Arab Spring, the author further states, is the demand for a “participatory government” that guarantees economic and social justice.

Chapter 4, “Civic Entrepreneurship in Politics and Society,” explores some of the countless groups, movements, organizations, and initiatives working on political and social issues in many of the Arab Spring countries. She examines various public squares, among them Egypt’s Tahrir (Liberation) Square, Yemen’s Taghyir (Change) Square, and Bahrain’s Pearl Roundabout, and tries to explain how they transitioned from “potent symbol[s] of government authority” (p. 46), particularly in Libya and Syria where images of leaders dominated the public squares, to public arenas where people talked, debated, and protested. She also relates how these public squares helped people cross their socioeconomic and political barriers (p. 47). How smoothly these public squares were created, maintained, and protected by the local groups during the turmoil, the author proclaims, sends a message of social bonds and cordial friendship among people of all groups and classes gathered for the common good: a healthy and just society. Here she also explores and outlines various pre- and post-Arab Spring features (e.g., pre-Spring activist “Local Citizen Councils,” “peaceful Social and Political movements,” post-Spring “Volunteerism,” and “Internet Activism”), all of which made their own contributions.

Chapter 5, “Civic Entrepreneurship in Art and Culture,” outlines various innovative enterprises that members of the general public use to express and demonstrate their anti-government anger through their hitherto hidden traditional art and culture. Such enterprises include “[c]reative resistance,” powerful “graffiti art” – “from tagging a slogan or name on a wall to producing elaborate and deeply complex murals that take days to create” (p. 82). The

Arab Spring, states Jamshidi, also saw the production of videos and films, as well as music and dance concerts, by professionals who sought to incite the general public's emotions and thus help the uprising gain the considerable momentum it needed to forge ahead.

Chapter 6, "Civic Entrepreneurship in Technology Startups," explores many tech startups "that reflect the Arab Spring's spirit of collaboration" (p. 103). Technology, as a main avenue for profit, non-profit business, and social enterprises, writes Jamshidi, enabled Arab entrepreneurs to undertake such enterprises as Saphon Energy (a Tunisian energy startup), 18 Days in Egypt (an online documentation project), Wadeeny (a Web-based carpooling service in Egypt), Souriali (an Internet-based radio station in Syria), Syria Untold, and Qabila Media Productions. All of these were designed to remedy the entrepreneurs' dismal socioeconomic conditions, and thus opened new windows for future technology-related entrepreneurs of various Arab Spring countries. Furthermore, MENA's netizens made extensive use of social networking tools to propagate and highlight the ongoing large-scale human rights violations.

Chapter 7, "Conclusion: Will Spring Be Eternal?" extolls the significance of civic entrepreneurship in awakening the sociopolitical consciousness of the region's people and reveals the author's optimism that the public sphere will remain dynamic and healthy enough to prevent any relapse into the usual social stagnation. Although Jamshidi thinks that some of these civic undertakings may become formal organizations, even startups of international repute, she writes that most of them "will exist only for as long as they are necessary" (p. 115). But what is more important, she states, is that although "individual projects and activities may come and go, other initiatives to address the same or other problems will inevitably emerge to take their place" (ibid).

The book, although brief and based mainly on personal interviews with various stakeholders, examines and explores the Arab Spring through a hitherto ignored important aspect: the role of civic entrepreneurship. Simple and lucid, beautifully presented and logically discussed, it is a potential contribution to the subject and an equally good read for students as well as scholars of social sciences, particularly of religion, political science, mass communication, and economics. It opens new vistas to contemplate on other unexplored results of the Arab Spring.

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