

A New Perspective on Middle-East Democracy

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Abstract

Spring 2011 was a historic year in the Middle East and was momentum for the rise of people power to overthrow the long-reigning authoritarian regime. This event is known as The Arab Spring. However, on the way, the Arab dream did not come easy. This book tries to capture the opportunities and challenges of democratization in Arab countries after the Arab Spring. There are three countries, namely Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria, which are the focus of this book's study. The interests of the United States (US) emerged as the trigger for democratization efforts. The US does not hesitate to hinder democratization in a country with leaders who are not pro-Western. It is not surprising that democratization in Arab countries is only seen as a US political project to safeguard its national interests. From this book, we can reflect on the situation in Indonesia. Does that also happen?

Keywords: *democracy, arab spring, middle east, politics*

For understanding the political turmoil in the Middle-East related to democratization, this book is very appropriate to become a guide for knowledge. Several things that can be drawn from the common thread of this book start from the cause of The Arab Spring. The Arab Spring is a political language that has become popular in the international political scene, especially in Arab countries, since early 2011. The term denotes the fall of the authoritarian regimes of the Arab world, starting from Tunisia, Zein Al-Abidin Ben Ali (Ben Ali), followed by Egypt with the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak, then to Libya, which succeeded in ending the era of the dictatorship of Moammar Gaddafi which had lasted for about 40 years, followed by Yemen, Bahrain and Syria which is still ongoing until now.

The Arab Spring, which was the beginning of the revival of hopes for a better and more democratic life in the Middle East, especially the Arab world, actually displayed a more sinister face. It has sacrificed more than 250,000 people in Syria to date due to the prolonged conflict. The Arab people call this important political event

al-Tsaurat al-Arabiyyah, namely a revolution that will change the order towards an ideal society and nation after being led for a long time with an authoritarian system, with unrestricted power, which curbs people's freedom and creates gaps between the elite (rulers), who live in luxury, with the poor. Westerners call it Arab Springs (*al-Rabi 'al-Arabiyy*), which is the season that became the starting point for the growth of democracy in Arab countries.

The chronology of The Arab Spring goes back to Tunisia when a young 26-year-old, Mohammed Bouazizi, protested against the atrocities of the local government under Ben Ali's authoritarian regime. Bouazizi carried out an act of self-immolation which attracted the attention of the whole country, even the world, on December 17, 2010. Apart from being triggered by this incident, the factors that caused The Arab Spring to flare up were that the three Arabs (Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria) had several similar social, economic, and political situations (Sahide *et al.*, 2015).

First, the three countries are each led by authoritarian leaders who have been in power for a long time as well as leaders who have come to power without going through a democratic election process. Second, the three countries built political regimes with a one-party system. Third, these countries have many records of human rights violations and limit the space of expression to their people, including the absence of press freedom. Fourth, the economic crisis and unemployment hit the people they lead, and the unemployment rate increases.

Therefore, the mass movements taking place in Arab countries have the same characteristics, namely protests against social and economic conditions, rejects dictatorships, and struggles against corruption. Poverty and unemployment that have been deprived since the colonialism era until now are still experienced. Even though the Middle East region has abundant oil natural resources. Meanwhile, their counterparts in the European region have enjoyed prosperity in the 20th century. The average per capita income of the people in the Middle East is 2 dollars per day. Natural wealth is managed by the state but controlled by a few people who are close to the authorities, including state assets in the form of companies and business entities (Ma'arif, 2016). The turmoil of The Arab Spring, which was the beginning to end the authoritarian regime and the rise of public expectations for democratic life in Arab countries, cannot be separated from the social, economic, and political conditions faced by the three countries (Yasmine, 2015).

In the democratic process, countries that intervened and felt the need to intervene based on humanity emerged (Kaukab, 2020). It is undeniable that the Arab world has its charm for developed countries, and Arab countries also have a significant role in world politics.

This book is written using scientific methodology but is written in light and communicative language so that the reader is like being in a discussion room with two-way communication. It is written in Indonesian language and, thus, could only reach a small scale of readers who understand the language. Yet, this gives a pleasant impression not boring even though the discussion is in the heavy topic category.

Challenges and Hopes for Democratization in the Middle-East

In the first plot of this book, it examines the background of The Arab Spring, the debate on democracy in the Arab world, the importance of the book, the position of the book, the theoretical basis used in the preparation of the book, the methods used, the techniques in data collection, and the analytical methods used for discussing research topics. Furthermore, it explains what factors are driving the turmoil of The Arab Spring. The discussion starts from the political conditions in Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, indicators of the governance of Arab countries, the domino effect of The Arab Spring, and concludes in a summary of the factors that triggered The Arab Spring.

A more in-depth discussion was elaborated on internal political problems in Arab countries where the discussion highlighted the crisis of legitimacy in Arab countries as well as the factors causing the crisis of political legitimacy. Then it reviews political reforms and challenges in Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. In the discussion, it was elaborated on the democratic initiatives before The Arab Spring and the challenges after the Arab Spring by looking at the social and cultural conditions of the Arab community which allegedly hindered democratization. In addition, women's political participation is also very low in Arab countries. This chapter also explains the suspicion of the democratization initiative which then intervened by foreign parties by trying to thwart democratization as a revival of Islamic politics.

The explanation of this book continues on foreign intervention and influence in the political turmoil of The Arab Spring. It is undeniable that the Arab world has its charm for developed countries, and Arab countries also have a significant role in world politics. Because of this, foreign parties intervene in various ways, one of which is by assisting. Several countries such as Russia and China are trying to maintain their alliance in the Middle East. Apart from aid, foreign parties also intervened through the role of the media by echoing that their intervention was based on humanity by using the "Rule of Law" as the basis for their existence. However, the presence of foreign parties gave birth to a crisis in the legitimacy of the political alliance of Tunisia, Egypt, and Syria. In democratization, Indonesia is present as a model country with a good implementation of democracy (Sahrasad, 2013). This chapter also discusses the role of Indonesia in the Middle East in the political field.

This book is very comprehensive in explaining political phenomena in the Middle East. The discussion is so in-depth that the reader can understand the flow of the content without losing a part in democratization before and after The Arab Spring. Readers are presented with a map of the problems that occur to the debate in the application of the democratic system in Middle Eastern countries, especially in Syria, Tunisia, and Egypt.

Conclusion

Broadly speaking, the work of one of the lecturers of the Master of International Relations at the Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta is very important to be read by all groups, especially academics of International Relations. This is because the descriptions and explanations in this book can add to the treasure trove of knowledge about the latest political developments in the Middle East region, especially in Arab countries. Also, this book can be a reference for academicians or researchers who wish to carry out further research related to the dynamics of politics and democratization in Arab countries. This book can inspire readers to be more sensitive and critical of international economic and political issues that occur in the Middle East region.

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