

Unfinished Revolutions, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring

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Abstract

The current situation in the Middle Eastern states that are dealing with reconciliation and transition process is not going well. The research of the author for about four years in Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia is full of first-hand information and knowledge gained through direct interviews with national figures who are with or against revolutionaries. Combining original experience through interviews with rich input of literature gained by secondary research has turned this book into an invaluable source to study and delve into the incomplete Arab uprisings and the reason behind them. Hence, this kind of comparative analysis gives a decent and invaluable literature to those scholars who incline to study the transitional process in the Middle East following the fact that it is based on the field study and includes first-hand experience along with face to face interviews. In other words, such an analysis could be meritorious for decision makers of any states and actors involved in transitional process to learn from the points made about these three Arab states.

Keywords: Arab Spring, Democracy, Yemen, Libya, Tunisia, Human Rights, Revolutions.

* Ibrahim Fraihat, **Unfinished Revolutions, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring**, Yale: Yale University Press, 2016, 304 pages.

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Book Review

Unfinished Revolutions, Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring

Ibrahim Fraihat *

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This book is mainly based on the field research conducted by the author for about four years in Yemen, Libya and Tunisia. It is full of first-hand information and knowledge gained through direct interviews with national figures who are with or against revolutionaries. Combining original experience through interviews with reach input of literature gained by secondary research has turned the book into an invaluable source to study and delve into the incomplete Arab uprisings and the reason behind them.

The book gives an illustration about the experience of Arab states where uprising took place and suffered from polarization. Their societies were polarized and divided due to several reasons mainly as the legacy of the tyrannical state of government in previous regimes. Such a polarization, the author states, “is unlikely to make successful

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transition to new systems of governance.” Hence, he suggests that in order for the shattered Arab spring societies to make a transition thorough substantial peace and stability, they need to address their deep rifts by proceeding with a comprehensive and all pervasive national reconciliation process. The main component of which are national dialogue, truth seeking, reparation for victims’ past injuries, handling of former regime elements who were involved in corruption and human rights violations, holding them accountable for their actions and carrying out institutional reform. Nevertheless, it merits recognition that his discussion mainly revolves around promoting and maintaining peace, stability and development rather than forging democracy as the goal of transitions.

The book is divided into three parts each of which contains several chapters. In part one, the author distinctively raises the issue of uprising in these three aforementioned countries. In Libya the need to disarm militants, displacement of almost one-sixth of its population and the continuation of destructive conflicts are discussed.

In Yemen, the southerner’s ambition to break up and the armed Huthis movements in North are mentioned to give an overview of the situation to the reader. It is stated that however, the government of Tunisia as the most successful Arab State in terms of transition still deals with cornucopia of rivalries and problems. Chapter four of this part sets out a comparison between these three countries and points to the challenges that these states and others share.

Part two is the main part of the book and as Ibrahim points out, turns out to be the core of the book. It compares and analyses each country’s progress in their effort to pursue national reconciliation process.

Chapter five of it brings about the significance of national dialogue which plays as a starting point for a comprehensive national reconciliation process. In this chapter the national dialogue has been represented as an advantageous process in these states through which the opportunity to develop visions and frameworks for their futures will be provided and legitimacy will be given to the transition process.

Chapter six of this part focuses on the issue of truth seeking which works as a healing for grievances and suffers of victims and their families along with advocating justice. It lays the ground for learning from past mistakes in order to avoid them in the post-conflict transition era.

Representation is also another topic which the author has recognized as other element of reconciliation process in chapter seven. He suggests that whether symbolic or material, it has a role in seeking for justice. Reparation can bring previously marginalized people and sects into the core of society and gives them strength to contribute to the development and burgeoning of the society.

Holding the perpetrators of the crimes and the personnel of previous regimes who have conducted abuses accountable is the main topic of Chapter eight. This is important on the grounds that Arab states such as Libya, Tunisia and Yemen struggled with it significantly. However, in order for societies to fully undergo political transitions, it is believed that accountability should be taken into consideration. But in his purpose to give a complete overview of a transitioning process, Ibrahim puts institutional reform as a complimentary factor in a political transition. Thus, Chapter nine deals with transparency, inclusivity and establishment of rule of law which will build trust and stability.

Part three puts actors at the core and lays emphasis on the roles they played in their countries. Chapter ten elaborates on the essential role of domestic civil society groups in Tunisia's progress towards developing transitional justice law and holding national dialogue to come out of the political deadlock. The author also points to the Libya civil society organizations (CSO)s which have assisted preventing and putting an end to tribal conflicts. The author has attended to the role of women in chapter eleven as well. In this regard, he signals the women's role in initiating revolutions in Yemen and Tunisia and argues that they should go further than this as their participation has deep impacts on women's status in their societies and utterly ameliorates their situation.

As another actor, tribes have been addressed in chapter twelve. In Ibrahim's opinion, tribes' roles "cannot and should not be ignored". In a comparison as Ibrahim points out tribes in Yemen and Libya have been used by their repressive regimes for political purposes. However, there interconnectedness has been a two-way street as regimes have manipulated tribes for their own political interests and tribes have been into regimes to implement their own agenda. In this vein, tribes have entered civil wars based on their own interests, geographic locations and their own understanding of the ongoing conflict.

However, they have filled the power gap in the conflict zones in the absence of state authorities. Better speaking, not only have they participated in conflicts but they have contributed to stability and reconciliation. Yemen and Libya's transition process are predicated on the positive constructive role of tribes which have been marginalized for long. In the state of instability as the outcome of uprisings, tribes could play a significant role in maintaining peace mainly by using their customary law and taking advantage of their experience in resolving internal conflicts. As Ibrahim indicates, in societies such as Libya and Yemen where tribes are powerful, Sheikhs are able to legitimize the political process and the consequent political transition.

Challenges abound when it comes to reconciliation process. In better words, he views the reconciliation process in Arab states as very challenging that has got motley collection of obstacles ahead of it significant among which is disapproving the invitation of the main contending parties of the conflict to initiate the reconciliation process. He truly mentions that reconciliation is made with enemies not friends, this feature has made it really" difficult and oftentimes contentious."

As a matter of fact, reconciliation should have some features and he has indicated some of them. In Ibrahim's point of view, despite the fact that sitting with the previous regimes' criminals is not easy but a better future -as he puts it- cannot be brought about "without sitting and talking to all primary stakeholders of the conflict." Hence, inclusiveness is one of those features represented in the book.

One other challenge is assigning a right time to go through reconciliation process and determining whether it should be held amid the end of fighting or after a longer time. Finding an answer to this question will have deep implications on the whole transition process. What Ibrahim comes up with is some time in between the early and late stages. Accordingly, he puts forth that as soon as the right sets of conditions are met, reconciliation process could be initiated.

Nonetheless, as he indicates, this process appears to be complicated since all the components including truth, reparation, accountability, institutional reform and national dialogue might not exist in a single reconciliation process. This feature might work as an obstacle on the path through a smooth reconciliation process in some countries as

happened in Tunisia. Moreover, this process cannot be merely deemed as a domestic process following the fact that in Libya or Yemen regional actors supported the civil war. Thus, according to Ibrahim both domestic and international actors could play as driving forces to implement national reconciliation. Whereas, the heaviest burden should be put on the domestic groups' shoulder namely women, political parties and civil society. In this regard, success ensues from sustainability and ownership both of which could be concomitant merits of domestic reconciliation.

On the other hand, a successful national reconciliation not only will benefit the national society but the international community will reap the rewards of it in at least two ways. One of which includes contribution to the knowledge about transition from state of war and instability to sustainable peace and stability and the other one is helping to boost security in the region which is of vital significance for the international community.

Moreover, according to the author, reconciliation should be well-defined as it is sometimes confused with other transitional processes such as transitional justice. To put it in better words, individual's position on reconciliation efforts are predicated on their impressions of the process. To elaborate on that he brings about examples such as Libyans for whom reconciliation means forgetting about the past and not holding previous regime's criminals accountable for their past crimes.

As he concludes, almost all Arab Spring countries except for Tunisia sit far behind what is expected in terms of reaching a sustainable peace and building good governance. There is a gap between theory and practice in these countries and for this reason Ibrahim hopes that the countries that are in the national reconciliation process reap the benefits of the points that were made in this book. Equally important, policy advisors as those who are involved in mechanisms of transition and reconciliation could also be the ones who could benefit from this book. There is also a hope for this book to be represented as a foundation for future research on transitions and national reconciliation.

Tackling the transitional hardships depends on national priorities, resources and other pressing factors. In this perspective, Ibrahim concedes that the reconciliation process in Arab states is very determining and must be addressed appropriately. In other words,

national reconciliation should move forward just based on the Arab States contexts. In this vein, the mentioned points in the book could be applicable in some transitional processes as a general trend. The points made in the book have the potential to be applied for states other than discussed in this book case by case. But considering the fact that each state could be treated based on its own context the reconciliation process could not be fully implemented in every state.

As is as clear as day, in the current situation in the Middle Eastern states which are dealing with reconciliation and transition process are not going through a successful experience. Hence, this kind of comparative analysis gives a decent and invaluable literature to those scholars who incline to study transitional process in the Middle East following the fact that it is based on the field study and includes first-hand experience along with face to face interviews. In other words, such an analysis could be meritorious for decision makers of any state and actors involved in transitional process to learn from the points made about these three Arab states.