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The Poverty of Dictatorship

By Dani Rodrik

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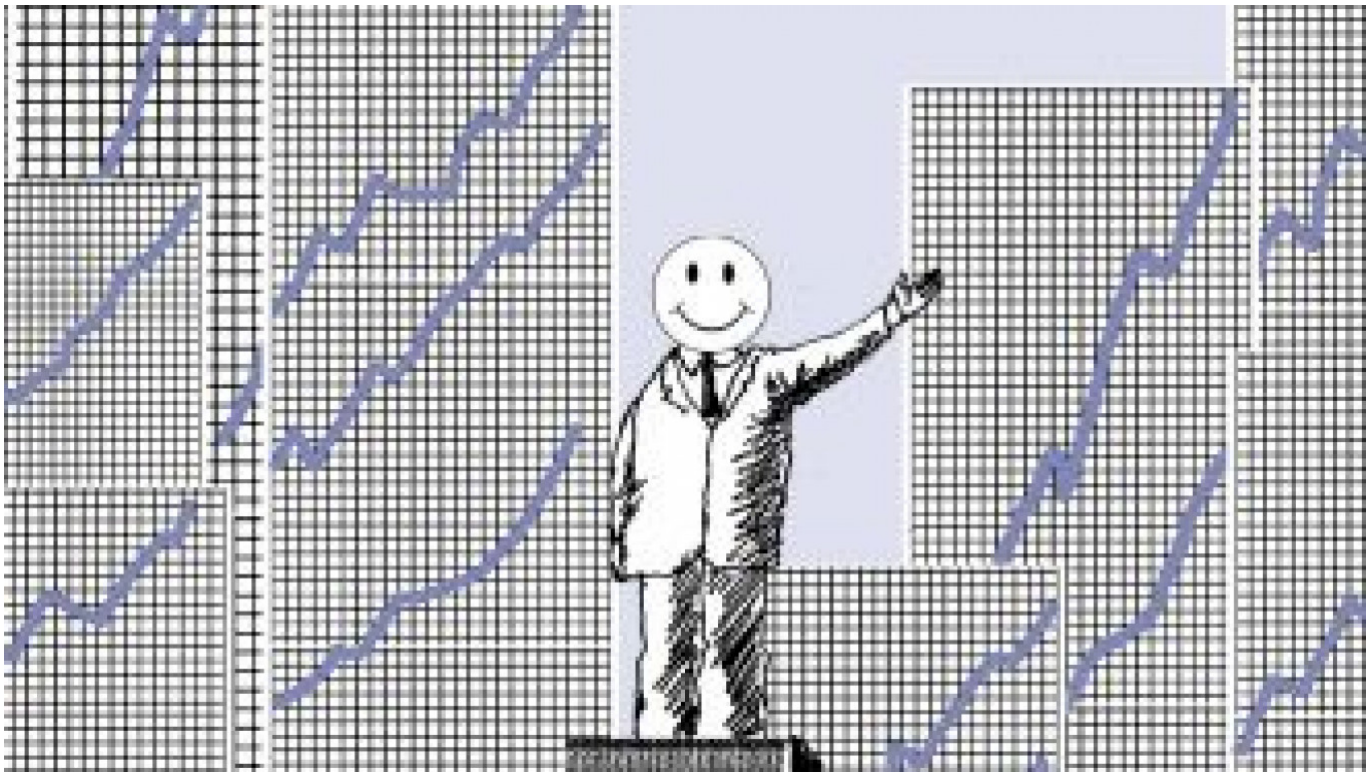

Perhaps the most striking finding in the United Nations' recent 20th anniversary "Human Development Report" is the outstanding performance of the Muslim countries of the Middle East and North Africa. Here was Tunisia, ranked sixth among 135 countries in terms of improvement in its Human Development Index, or HDI, over the previous four decades, ahead of Malaysia, Hong Kong, Mexico and India. Not far behind was Egypt, ranked 14th.

The HDI is a measure of development that captures achievements in health and education alongside economic growth. Egypt and especially Tunisia did well enough on the growth front, but where they really shone was on these broader indicators. At 74, Tunisia's life expectancy edges out Hungary's and Estonia's, countries that are more than twice as wealthy. Some 69 percent of Egypt's children are in school, a ratio that matches much richer Malaysia's. Clearly, these were states that did not fail in providing social services or distributing the benefits of economic growth widely.

Yet in the end it did not matter. The Tunisian and Egyptian people were mad at their governments, and they were not going to take it anymore. If Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali or Egypt's Hosni Mubarak were hoping for political popularity as a reward for economic

gains, they must have been sorely disappointed.

One lesson of the Arab annus mirabilis, then, is that good economics need not always mean good politics. The two can part ways for quite some time. It is true that the world's wealthy countries are almost all democracies. But democratic politics is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for economic development over a period of several decades.

Despite the economic advances they registered, Tunisia, Egypt and many other Middle Eastern countries remained authoritarian countries ruled by a narrow group of cronies, with corruption, clientelism and nepotism running rife. These countries' rankings on political freedoms and corruption stand in glaring contrast to their rankings on development indicators.

In Tunisia, Freedom House reported prior to the Jasmine Revolution, "The authorities continued to harass, arrest and imprison journalists and bloggers, human rights activists and political opponents of the government." The Egyptian government was ranked 111th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's 2009 survey of corruption.

And, of course, the converse is also true: India has been democratic since independence in 1947, yet the country didn't begin to escape its low "Hindu rate of growth" until the early 1980s.

A second lesson is that rapid economic growth does not buy political stability on its own, unless political institutions are allowed to develop and mature rapidly as well. In fact, economic growth itself generates social and economic mobilization, a fundamental source of political instability.

As the late political scientist Samuel Huntington put it more than 40 years ago, "social and economic change — urbanization, increases in literacy and education, industrialization, mass media expansion — extend political consciousness, multiply political demands and broaden political participation." Now add social media such as Twitter and Facebook to the equation, and the destabilizing forces that rapid economic change sets into motion can become overwhelming.

These forces become most potent when the gap between social mobilization and the quality of political institutions widens. When a country's political institutions are mature, they respond to demands from below through a combination of accommodation, response and representation. When they are underdeveloped, they shut those demands out in the hope that they will go away — or be bought off by economic improvements.

The events in the Middle East amply demonstrate the fragility of the second model. Protesters in Tunis and Cairo were not demonstrating about a lack of economic opportunity or poor social services. They were rallying against a political regime that they felt was insular, arbitrary and corrupt — one that did not allow them adequate voice.

A political regime that can handle these pressures need not be democratic in the Western sense of the term. One can imagine responsive political systems that do not operate through free elections and competition among political parties. Some would point to Oman or Singapore as examples of authoritarian regimes that are durable in the face of rapid economic

change. Perhaps so. But the only kind of political system that has proved itself over the long haul is that associated with Western democracies.

Which brings us to China. At the height of the Egyptian protests, Chinese web surfers who searched the terms "Egypt" or "Cairo" were returned messages saying no results could be found. Evidently, the Chinese government did not want its citizens to read up on the Egyptian protests and get the wrong idea. With the memory of the 1989 Tiananmen Square movement ever present, China's leaders are intent on preventing a repeat.

China is not Tunisia or Egypt, of course. The Chinese government has experimented with local democracy and has tried hard to crack down on corruption. Even so, protest has spread over the last decade. There were 87,000 instances of what the government calls "sudden mass incidents" in 2005, the last year that the government released such statistics, which suggests that the rate has since increased. Dissidents challenge the supremacy of the Communist Party at their peril.

The Chinese leadership's gamble is that a rapid increase in living standards and employment opportunities will keep the lid on simmering social and political tensions. That is why it is so intent on achieving annual economic growth of 8 percent or higher — the magic number that it believes will contain social strife.

But Egypt and Tunisia have just sent a sobering message to China and other authoritarian regimes around the world: Don't count on economic progress to keep you in power forever.

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