Can a New Generation Bring about Regime Change?

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Peaceful protests and demonstrations have swept through the Arab world, toppling rulers and advancing programs of radical change. Some enthusiasts for these movements have already proclaimed them a revolution. They predict a new Middle Eastern political and economic order. A new generation of young people—men and women, mainly in their twenties and thirties, using their skills in cyberspace communication and fueled by many frustrations—assembled vast numbers in peaceful protests that have thus far claimed many triumphs. They forced the departures of the long-standing dictators of Egypt and Tunisia and have demanded that the monarchs of Jordan, Morocco, and Bahrain reign rather than rule.

The leaders of these uprisings share many goals. They want more open societies where security forces will not terrorize the citizenry and where the inhabitants will enjoy more abundant and free lives. Yet, they also differ on profoundly important issues: the place of Islam within their societies, the relations of their countries with the United States and Israel, the degree of state control over the economy, and the limitations that society should or should not place on freedoms, including on free elections. To date, the protesters have ousted some detested rulers but have yet to effect true regime change. Everywhere the old guard clings to power. In Egypt, Mubarak, his son, and some of his cronies are gone. But the Supreme Military Council, headed by aged, Mubarak-appointed generals, wields the ultimate power. In Libya, Colonel al-Qadhafi, forty-one years in power, has refused to follow the example of Mubarak and the Tunisian strong man, Bin ʿAli. He has mobilized the army to suppress the resistance. The future is still in the hands of the older generations. Will they be responsive to the youthful protesters and their goals, or will they dig in and defend their privileges? Their decisions and the choices that their youthful opponents make will determine whether these uprisings ultimately transform Middle Eastern societies.

Imagining "the Political" Otherwise

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The recent revolutions and uprisings in the Middle East represent a rare historic opening for scholars, offering us nothing short of the opportunity to rethink the possibilities of history and our conceptions of "the political" itself. In so doing, we might be more open to the ways in which the empirical continually challenges us to rethink our conceptual

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