

## **Arab Spring and the Theory of Relative Deprivation**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper provides an account of Arab Spring origin, ideology and demands of civil society. The political turmoil in the Arab world challenged the political status quo of Middle East and North Africa. Arab Spring is the fundamental event in the Arab world history. It also describes the role of well educated youth and power of social media in Arab Spring. It further explains the demonstrations at Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria in details. Specifically, the paper spotlights on the relative deprivation theory of Ted Robert Gurr to illustrate why Arab Spring emerged. Relative deprivation theory has been used to clarify how socio-economic shortages (unemployment, education and poverty) and political inefficiencies lead to collective turmoil. The answer provides a clue to resolve the current problem.*

**Keywords:** Arab spring, political status quo, demonstration, relative deprivation.

### **1. Introduction**

The Arab Spring also known as the Arab Uprising is a Revolutionary wave of protests that started in 2011 and spread throughout the Arab world. It is a pro-democracy demonstration which has been sweeping through Middle East and North African since 2010. Uprisings were originated in Tunisia on December 18, 2010 when Mohamed Bouazizi, a street merchant received mistreatment from the police and in order to protest, he set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid. Some days later, his death turned into a form of national turmoil which forced Tunisian President Zein al- Abedin to run off the country. Like a wildfire, demonstrations spread from one state to another in Middle East and North African countries (MENA). After Tunisian revolution, demonstrations were blown up in Egypt and Libya; major uprisings were started in Algeria, Syria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen and Oman, and relatively minor protests were blown up in Kuwait, Lebanon, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Morocco and Western Sahara to bring down their authoritative establishment. These demonstrations eventually reshaped the nature of politics in the Middle East and North Africa (McKay, 2011).

According to recent research, high rate of unemployment and increasing inequality stimulates social unrest around the world. In Arab world, numbers of factors have been identified as a root cause behind these demonstrations. The issues such as dictatorship, total monarchy, human rights violations, corruption, unemployment, high rate of inflation and economic decline dissatisfied the young population of the Arab World.

For decades, the Arab world citizens experienced social inequality and felt deprived by their governments. Mostly the revolts were motivated by the quest for democratization reforms (Osasumwen, 2012). For instance, in economic sphere citizens felt deprivation and inequality gave rise to civil movements. Organizations like labor unions attracted more supporters for protests. From 1980 to 2010 per capita income of Middle East was only 0.5 percent annually. Unemployment was averaged about 12% over the last two decades which was the highest rate of any region of the world (Ogbonnaya, 2012).

There was a large percentage of well educated people but did not have job opportunities which increased poverty in the Arab countries. A major slogan of the protestors in the Arab world has been 'the will of the people is to bring down the authoritative regimes' (Ogbonnaya, 2012). Internet played a significant role in these protests, especially through social media such as face book, YouTube and Twitter. Social media enabled the flames of dissatisfaction to spread throughout the Arab world (McKay, 2011). Although demonstrators have faced violent reactions from their government authorities but they were succeeded in the down fall of authoritative regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, whereas violent and intensifying protest is still going on in Syria.

Relative deprivation theory holds that instead of an absolute standard deprivation, a gap between expectations and reality leads men to political violence (Meehy, 2014). The main reason behind the Arab Spring was economic grievances which were caused by regimes' actions in each respective state and lack of social justices. However, each state has its own particular differences. The protest and revolts are still going on but some countries have already succeeded (Lynch, 2012).

## **1.1 Revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria**

### **1.1.1 TUNISIA**

Tunisia was the first country of cyber revolution. Its society has experienced a number of revolutions and socio-political protests during its modern history. In 1978, protests were organized by General Union of Tunisian Workers against weakening financial crisis. Many protesters were killed and injured during demonstrations. In 1984, bread riots were begun because of high inflation rate. Both these uprising in Tunisian recent history can be considered according to Adib Nehme 'uprising or civil society against statist regimes'. Few years after this, on the November 7, 1987 the then Prime Minister Zine el-Abidine Bin Ali declared President Habib Bourguiba mentally unfit to run the state as a result he became the President. He pledged to flourish Tunisian economic and political system. He fulfilled his promise by organizing democratic election in 1999, which he won. When citizens realized that things doesn't change the way they need to, they start to protest for change but neither of prior protests turned out like the one on 2011 which was known as Jasmine Revolution. This revolution was the root cause of the Arab Spring. 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, Mohamad Bouazazi twenty six year old man was selling fruits and vegetables in the streets of Sidi Bouzid illegally. Police persons came to stop him but he lighted himself to fire. In the start, this incident was looked just an ordinary event but this time it was quite different. This unknown Tunisian man had begun the wave of revolts against oppressive and corrupt government throughout the country (Ogbonnaya, 2012).

There were following reasons behind the developments and quick spread of revolts in Tunisia. Advanced technology, easy access to internet services and development in social media had become the root cause of Arab Spring. It's very difficult for ruling authorities to control over social media as compare to traditional media. Hence, social media, videos and pictures played significant role in uprising. Tunisian citizens recorded whatever happened in protests against corruption, political oppression and posted it on social media. Consequently, Protests turned into violent demonstrations and spread throughout the country. When protesters reached the state capital Tunis, demonstrators had stopped raising slogan against policy changes and started calling for removal of President Ben Ali. After this President Ben Ali fled to Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on 14 January, 2011 (Kerson, 2011). Within a month Tunisian people had successfully overthrown the 23 years old authoritative regime of President Bin Ali by a demonstration of popular pressure (McKay, 2011).

Unemployment was the second reason behind Tunisian uprising. Mostly people get higher qualification with the belief that it will help them to find a better job. Therefore, well educated people may feel more dissatisfaction from high rate of unemployment as compared to those who did not expect any good employment opportunities. Unemployment ultimately created a sense of deprivation in well educated people. Therefore, this discontent led towards political violence as mentioned by Ted Robert Gurr in his theory of Relative deprivation. Moreover, educated people have more information about usage of internet and events happened around the world. Tunisian citizens had no rights of speech, expression and press which were given to citizens of other countries.

Tunisian citizens started to compare themselves with others and felt deprived. Sense of inequality and deprivation led them to revolt for democratic system (Kerson, 2011).

Luxurious life style of the President Bin Ali was another important reason of Jasmine revolution. Tunisian economy is mostly based on industries and tourism which faced a huge downfall during 2009 world financial crisis. Tunisian people did not like leaders to spend huge money on their lifestyle as the economy was worsening rapidly (Ogbonnaya, 2012).

### **1.1.2 EGYPT**

Egypt was the second state after Tunisia in which revolt started against the corrupt regime of President Hosni Mubarak. President Hosni Mubarak ruled country for thirty years without a democratic election. Both protests were mainly based on economic ground rather than democratic. Labour movement provided the basis for the 2011 Egyptian uprisings. In April 2008, revolts in Mahallah were based on economic grounds as food prices were high as compared to wages. Labour activist Kamal Fayomi explained in his article titled 'The Labour Movement and the Future of Democracy in Egypt (2012)' that Mahallah is the mother of Tahrir. On 6 April, 2008, they said the entire country was in Mahallah. On January 2011, they stated that everyone was in Tahrir (Levine & Eletebi, 2012).

Tunisian protest inspired the Egyptians demonstrators and gradually removed the fear barrier. In 1990, Islamic groups were against President Mubarak control but he did everything without consideration to law. So hatred against President Mubarak among citizen was grown and his influence gradually decreased. People of Egypt faced high poverty rate, inflation and unemployment. In 2011, long lasting change came when well-educated youth joined hands together on the basis of similar interest and started to protest in Egypt. One of the main features of the 2011 revolt was the unity, lack of fear and common goal within social movements. Government imposed restrictions on shutdown of internet cafe and curfew at 6 o'clock which provokes even more revolts in the country. Restrictions on internet services were against the personal freedom which inspired more citizens to join protest against government. According to Mark Lynch 'for changing Egyptian minds for participation in revolts was death of young man Khaled Said who was dragged from internet cafe and brutally killed. Demonstrators created the face book page in the memory of Khaled and organized revolts (2011).

Relative Deprivation theory (RDT) is relevant in elaborating the protest in Cairo. RDT is mainly used in situations where people feel that their basic rights to certain goods and services are not fulfilled which create motivation to change this situation. Young generation of Egypt who initiated protests was familiar with the benefits of democracy. Moreover, globalized technology i.e. internet assisted in forming sense of deprivation among Egyptians as the internet and foreign media criticized President Mubarak regime and provided alternatives to influence young people to change the situation. After demonstration on February 2011 President forcefully resigned and turned power to the Supreme Council of the Armed forces. In 2012, interim government of Supreme Council of the Armed Force held elections and Islamist Mohamed Morsi became the first democratic President of the State. But in June 2013, many Egyptians has demanded resignation from Morsi and after that army announced the throw out of Morsi and started preparing for new elections (Levine & Eletebi, 2012). After two months, head of the army Abdel Fattah Saeed Khalil el-sisi strated crackdown of pro-Morsi protestors. In the wake of violence Sisi established an interim government which later on became an elected president of the country.

### **1.1.3 LIBYA**

Since 1969, President Muammar Gaddafi took the power over Libya and introduced a new socialist political system named as Jamahiriya (state of masses) (Bhadwaj, 2012). The core idea behind Jamahiriya was based on active participation of citizens in decision-making process. It was assumed to be a leading example of 'direct democracy'. Main aim of Jamahiriya system was to become more efficient system as compared to democracy but in reality, Jamahiriya did not have any space for independent political action (West, 2011).

In Libya Private ownership, trade and freedom of press were considered illegal but in Egypt and Tunisia the civil community was flourished after demonstrations. In 1990, radical Islamic movement was started in Libya against President Gaddafi regime but it was unsuccessful (Joffe, 2012). In February 2011, peaceful protest was held in Benghazi. Protestors demanded democratic reforms, elimination of corruption and violation of Human Rights in Libya (Lynch, 2013).

Gaddafi's regime arrested the two citizens which provided excellent advertisement channel to demonstrators. He ordered his troops to stop protest with power, which was published on social media and uprisings spreaded throughout the country (Lynch, 2013).

Demonstration in Libya was occurred soon after the collapse of President Ben Ali and President Hosni Mubarak's authoritarian regimes in Tunisia and Egypt respectively. The common sentiment was that if Muammar Gaddafi oppression and violence against Libyan citizen had become successful than it could encourage other regimes to pursue his example. On the other hand, if demonstrators would be successful than it could encourage other protestors of Arab world to intend for democracy. Internet and television services were blocked by the Gaddafi which generated apprehension and anxiety among citizens but Protest was flourished quickly. On March 18, 2011 the Security Council of United Nation passed a resolution which allowed the use of all necessary means to end brutal killing of oppressive government. On August 2011, Gaddafi regime was collapsed, in October he was captured and killed. Example set by protestors of Tunisia and Egypt and media attention worked as useful tools to end Gaddafi period. Relative Deprivation Theory can also effectively explain in the Libyan case since the grievances that launched the social movements were felt collectively.

### 1.1. Comparison Between Libya, Tunisia And Egypt On Selected Socio-Political And Economic Indices

Variables	Egypt	Tunisia	Libya
Corruption in Government & Public Officials	40.00	49.00	00.00
Poverty	65.11	82.17	63.21
Human Rights Violation	25.00	20.45	17.23
National Security	82.05	92.61	83.7
Human Development	73.54	85.26	82.1
Rule of law	60.85	51.52	24.42
Sustainable Economic Opportunity	59.67	65.56	58.47
Participation and Human Rights	32.55	38.70	17.23

Source: <http://www.moibrahimfoundation.org/>

#### 1.1.4 YEMEN

Initially demonstrations in Yemen were against economic conditions, unemployment, corruption and governments plan to amend constitutions of Yemen. On 17 December, 2010 self immolation of Tunisian citizen Muhammad Buazizi attained significant importance as the symbolic start of revolt. When Tunisian protesters were successful to overthrow Ben Ali regimes, small scale of Yemeni started protests and demanded to remove President Ali Abdullah Saleh. A month later when overthrown of Egyptian ruler Hosni Mubarak stimulated popular, Yemeni protesters demanded to overthrow three decades of Ali Abdullah Selah authoritarian control. After the integration of northern and southern Yemen in May 1990, Ali Saleh took control over the country. In response to the protests, President Ali Saleh made numerous economic allowances, reduction in income tax, increased salaries and promised to not stand for reelection in 2013 but his moves failed to stop protesters (Rad & Maleki , 2013).

Undoubtedly, large number of socio-economic problems existed i.e. high rate of unemployment (28%), particularly among well educated youth (57%) according to United Nations Procurement Division (2009), rapid growth in labor force (42%) which was highest in Middle East and North Africa. There were no social justices in allocation of wealth and income among rulers and public, no democratic governance, corruption reflected relative deprivation as a relevant justification for the Yemen's revolts in 2011 (Rad & Maleki , 2013).

#### 1.1.5. SYRIA

After the downfall of dictatorship at Tunisia and Egypt through demonstrations, few Syrian people expected to follow it for their own state. The current Syrian conflict is basically influenced by Syria's history. In order to understand recent conflict, it is necessary to look at the historical background leading to the current issue in Syria. Form the four centuries, Syria was the part of Ottoman Empire. In 1916, Arabs utilized the British military aid opportunity to revolt against Ottoman Empire. Although, Britain had promised that Arab world would get complete independence. But under the agreement named Sykes-Picot between Britain and France the Middle East region was divided between them and leaving the Syria under the control of France.

Syrians revolted and got full independence in 1946. After independence Syria faced political instability. Several conflicts occurred and Syria was under Western threat because of improving relations with Soviet Union. In 1963, Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party came into power and brought security and stability in the country. It set socialist program in the country (Bhadwaj, 2012).

Presently, President Bashar-al-Assad is ruling in Syria which came into power in 2000, when his father Hafez al-Assad passed away. Although Syrian people were facing dictatorship from last 40 years and suffered from economical and social challenges which promoted uprisings in other part of Arab world. People of Syria showed support to their President Bashar al-Assad. Initially there were very high hopes for reform in Syria under new President Bashar al-Assad. In the beginning, President Bashar al-Assad allowed some political activities and lessened political restrictions at Syria which was known as Damascus Spring. But soon President returned to its authoritarian and oppressive style of rule which was used by his father. When President Bashar al-Assad was failed to bring political reforms in Syria, provocation among people grew rapidly (Brownlee, Masoud, & Reynolds, 2013).

An Alliance among opposition leaders was agreed to form the Damascus Declaration in 2005 for the execution of political reforms and lifting of the Emergency Law in the country. After this declaration, many opposition leaders were arrested but some remained active. These people ultimately established the most significant opposition group in Syria which eventually set a stage for the events to follow. Syrian people inspired by the peaceful uprising movements in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and eventually protests erupted in Southern city of Syria called Deraa in March 2011 that demanded democratic political reforms in the country (Saleh & White, 2013).

Pro-democracy protest was escalated in Deraa when teenagers were arrested for painting revolutionary slogans on the school wall and security forces brutally shoot them. This was the start of an uprising in Syria that rapidly spread around the country. Initially, demonstrations were small and demanded reforms rather than resignation from President. Syrian President Bashar Al Asad tried to end demonstrations by using power against protestors. The cruelty of the Assad regime, using chemical weapons against citizens further radicalized the demonstrators. After the use of chemical warfare, the turmoil triggered nationwide protest which was demanding resignation of President Bashar al-Assad in July, 2011 (Momani, 2013). Use of force by government to suppress the protestors further escalated the uprising. Protestors were successful in gaining control over north and east of the country after facing violent reaction from President.

According to Relative Deprivation theory, societal conditions that increase the average of expectation without increasing the abilities, further increase the severity of discontent. As mentioned above in Syria case who initially had very high expectations form political reforms under new President Bashar al-Assad. But there expectations were not fulfilled by President Bashar al-Assad which led them to revolts. Relative deprivation theory of Gurr better elaborates the Syrian demonstration by saying that a gap between expectation (political reforms) and attainment (authoritative rule) led Syrian individuals towards political violence.

### **1.1 Relative Deprivation Theory And Arab Spring**

Relative deprivation theory was given by Robert Gurr. In his theory he gives a psychological approach to elaborate how collective dissatisfaction is manifested as political violence by providing aggression-frustration mechanism. He said that anger which was created by deprivation is a motivating instrument that inclined men to aggression. According to him deprivation leads toward aggression. Aggression is always the result of frustration among people. Deprivation word gets from comparison made in minds of people. Ted Gurr elaborates that higher degree of frustration leads the greater political instability in a country. The major focus in Relative Deprivation theory is on conditions where citizens feel that their certain rights are banned by ruling authority. This creates motivation in people's mind to get rid of prevailing situations. It is mainly focused on individual's feelings and actions. This is divided into two forms i.e. egoistic and fraternal deprivation. Egoistic deprivation is personal deprivation and fraternal deprivation refers to group deprivation. First form of deprivation occurs when people compare themselves interpersonally. Whereas group deprivation occurs when group of citizen compare themselves with other groups. The gap between haves and have not is people deprivation or it is relative deprivation if it depends on the basis of comparison with others. Relative deprivation is subjective judgment of a person. Ted Gurr defined relative deprivation as 'actor's perception of difference between their expectations and capabilities. A gap between expectation and reality creates frustrations, disturbance, aggression, revolutions and conflict. The greater the gap is, the greater the magnitude of aggression and violence (Gurr, 1970).

Protestors of Middle East and North African countries framed their demands in the language of relative deprivation theory. By applying Relative Deprivation theory on the situation of Arab Spring in Middle East and North Africa, where the feeling of people were drastically unjustified by the people, which created the revolts and uprising in order to get rid of oppressive regimes. Initially revolts were started in Tunisia and Egypt which provided awareness and basis to other revolts in Middle Eastern states. Group of People of Middle East and North African countries compared themselves with other groups and felt deprived. They thought that their certain rights were not fulfilled by corrupt regime and through protest they would achieve them. Frequently Relative Deprivation theory is connected with demonstrations and revolutions. In Relative Deprivation, feeling of deprivation over certain rights and power can lead individuals to establish social movements to bring change. Relative Deprivation theory effectively explained the Libyan situation from the time when injustices were experienced collectively which ultimately created the social movement. Libyan demonstrators got motivation and self-confidence from the uprising occurring in its neighboring States and brought democratic system through uprising (Walker & Wong, 2002).

After the downfall of dictatorship at Tunisia and Egypt through demonstrations, few Syrian people expected to follow it for their own state. According to Ted Robert Gurr, societal conditions that increase the average of expectation without increasing the abilities ultimately increase the severity of discontent. When President Bashar al-Assad came into power, he showed high commitments for political reforms but soon he followed authoritative style. A gap between expectation and attainment led Syrian individuals towards uprising for political reforms.

In Arab Spring a familiar characteristic of demonstrations was the oppression of totalitarian regimes in which citizens felt deprived from certain basic human rights and freedom of expression. Authoritative regimes were enjoying luxurious life style without taking care of citizens. These above mentioned countries were theoretically democratic but not in practices i.e. in Tunisia and Egypt, one person was ruling the country as President for decades. In Libya there was not presidential selection because Gaddafi had his own political system called Jamahiriya. People of these countries compared themselves with the people of democratic states, who had basic human rights and freedom of expression which created deprivation in their minds which led towards aggression in the form of demonstrations. The economic discrepancy in Tunisia and Egypt also created high unemployment rate, as a consequence well-educated people participated more in demonstrations. Unemployment created frustration among youth, which led them toward aggression. Moreover, they tried to encourage other citizens to participate in uprisings in order to establish a true democratic system. Social Inequality and injustices forced people of Arab world to begin uprising to get their actual rights and freedom (Walker & Wong, 2002). Besides that bread revolts was another common cause behind Arab spring. In Arab World inflation rate was very high which helped people to generate grievances against the state. Relative Deprivation Theory can be applied as the citizens felt economic deprivation of certain basic requirements as a result they started protest to gain these necessities. Mostly lower middle class demonstrated against unemployment and inflation.

### **Conclusion**

Although the political, social, environmental and economical factors that caused the Arab Uprising appeared similar in nature but varied from country to country according to the socio-economic and political circumstances. The Arab uprising was started because of the great feeling of discontent, injustices, inequality, corruption, inflation, unemployment and violation of basic Human Rights, social imbalance, foreign interference, censorship and government of oppressive regimes.

Civil society had strong impact on the demonstrations particularly through social networks i.e. face book and tweeter. All the countries such as Libya, Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and Syria had naturally their own unique basis for the grievances which formed uprising. Simultaneously, there were several common elements i.e. low political participation of the public in political affairs, lack of social justice, and oppression governments which caused distressed in citizens' minds. After many decades, for the first time in North Africa and Arab World, democratic elections have been conducted in Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt and Libya. For the first time right of vote was given to women in Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

Relative Deprivation theory clearly explains the reasons behind these social movements which occurred in Middle East and North African Countries. The roots of Arab Spring were traced in economic, social and political unrest. Unrest created aggression among deprived people that resulted in protests and uprising. According to RTD Sense of deprivation fostered people towards structural changes as it happened in Yemen, Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

The Consequences of these above mentioned demonstrations have been mixed. Some uprisings have led the end of longstanding oppressive governments as occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Tunisian demonstrators were successful to overthrow the President Ben Ali government in January 2011. After the Tahrir Square protest, in February 2011 Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak resigned from his 30 years of Presidency. In October 20, 2011 Libyan demonstrators were successful in overthrowing the autocratic regime of Muammar Gaddafi. After demonstrations in Yemen, President Saleh government was replaced with President Mansour Al-Hadi who took the charge in February 2012. Some demonstrations are still going on as in Syria there are demands for the downfall of President Bashar al-Assad. The uprisings have resulted in a violent ongoing civil war between Protestors and President Assad loyalists.

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