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## *Review Article*

# The Arab Uprisings and Worldwide Responses: A Review of the Literature

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## Introduction

A literature review can be defined as locating, gathering, highlighting and summarizing the previous studies that most strongly relate to research topic. It helps a researcher to determine whether a research topic or subject is worth studying and it also provides insight into ways in which a researcher can limit the scope to a required area or subject of inquiry (Creswell 2016, p. 25). This article will scrutinize earlier studies on the influence and impact of the Arab uprisings – beyond the affected states in the region of Middle East and North Africa.

Since the outbreak of the Arab Uprisings in late 2010, it is not an exaggeration to say that thousands of peer-reviewed papers, conference proceedings, theses, books, abstracts and articles relating to the events have been produced and published all over the world. Journals such as *Contemporary Politics*, *Democracy, Democratization*, *Mediterranean Politics*, *Middle East Journal, North African Studies* and the *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* are notable for their coverage on the Arab Uprisings since the launch of the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution in December 2010. Many perspectives have been discussed and covered - ranging from common topics such as the roots of the events, factors contributed to the uprisings, states and actors involved, timelines

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and backgrounds to the events, prospects for political transition and economic reform and the "new waves of democratisation" – to newer subjects such as the role of new social media and technology during the protests, military issues, the rise of Islamist parties, the influence and impact of the events on other states beyond MENA and the debates on "democracy" – since the old narratives of Middle East politics were mainly dominated by the 'persistence of authoritarian' discourses. To narrow down these narratives into more specific issues, this review article focuses on two aspects: 1) Views and perceptions of other states; and 2) Its influence and impact on other states and the Islamists. The following sub-sections will thematically and contextually examine in further detail the selected previous studies which discuss the Arab Spring phenomenon – from the view point of its implication for Islamists and other states and also how the global community – from Europe, Russia, and Southeast Asia - observed it.

**The Arab Uprisings and Islamists**

In general, the term 'Islamist' is derived from a wide concept of Islamism. According to Masaki (1996), the concept of Islamism is used to refer to political ideology which advocates the establishment of an Islamic political order, mostly via establishment of an Islamic state or Islamic community. Meanwhile, an Islamist is a person who adopts Islamism as his or her political ideology. Islamist groups and political parties, on the other hand, are social and political movements that justify their ideologies, goals, political values and principles based on their interpretation of Islam and certain past Islamic traditions (Ashour 2010, p. 4). Researchers such as Asef Bayat, Jillian Schwedler, Peter Mandaville and John Esposito who have looked at this particular field of Islamism found that study on Islamist movements and democratic politics generally falls into two broad and overlapping areas. The first views at Islamism and political participation, with scholars largely examining, among other issues – Islamist political parties, their relations to the state, the conditions under which they enter elections, and the impact of political participation upon the parties. The second broad area of research looks more closely at Islamism and civil society, with scholars examining other types of Islamist organisations and activities, for instance their role in promoting political Islam and democratisation (Clark 2012, p. 120). It seems that both areas of study share common methodological debates concerning what exactly one should view at

when observing Islamist movements – for example the extent to which their ideology and activism progress.

Throughout the Muslim world today, one can find an abundance of Islamist movements – from the smallest moderate groups to the largest radical organisations. The post-Arab Uprisings could potentially trigger what would be the new region-wide democratisation and regime change dynamic in an overwhelmingly Muslim region, which raises many significant questions about Islam and democracy in general (Saikal and Acharya 2014, p. 2). Furthermore, one of the most remarkable aspects of the Arab Uprisings, as claimed Ahmad (2013, p. 124) and Clark (2012, p. 119) was the electoral victory of Islamist parties in the two countries that heralded the 'Spring' – Tunisia and Egypt. Although Olivier Roy (2012) consistently argues that Islamists did not play a prominent role during the Arab uprisings, it is undeniable that the rise of Islamist parties is one of the main features of the political landscape in the new Middle East and North Africa post 2011 Uprisings (Al-Anani 2012, p. 466). The following paragraphs will discuss the question of whether the Arab Spring phenomenon really has impacted the development of Islamists.

The article written by Iona Matesan entitled "The Impact of the Arab Spring on Islamist Strategies" (2012) draws on the experience of certain Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa which are becoming more moderate after the victory of nonviolent protest in ousting several dictators in the region. Drawing on insight from Eva Bellin, as well as the case of *Al-Jamā'ah al-Islāmīyah* ("Islamic Congregation") movement in Egypt, Matesan maintains that the political change in the post-Arab Spring has made nonviolent strategies more appealing to Islamist groups. The experience of political transition from the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution and Egyptian 25th January Revolution have sent powerful signals to the Arab world that nonviolent resistance can be more meaningful for opposition groups, especially the Islamists, than the act of violent rebellion. Given the founding ideology of *Al-Jamā'ah al-Islāmīyah* and its violent past, the commitments of its leaders to respect the law and participate in politics through the formation of a political party became even more significant after the Revolution (Matesan 2012, p. 39).

Yet, the author realizes that this statement may not be applicable to other regions beyond the Middle East and North Africa when she

compares the development of the Indonesian *Jemaah Islāmīyah,* which still has difficulties in abandoning violent tactics. Matesan's work perhaps offers sufficient analysis of how and why some of the Islamist groups in the post-Arab Spring era accept nonviolent protest as one of the methods to practice that important element of democracy – freedom of expression. However, the study is largely based on 'ex-radical' groups with a limited time frame (since the launch of the Arab Uprisings until summer 2012). The overthrow of the Islamist coalition government in June 2013 by the Egyptian army may shift the present Islamist confidence in democracy – meaning that a new analysis should be developed with regard to Mateson's main findings, which could include the recent trend of political Islam worldwide.

In addition to Matesan's study, Tarek Chamki (2014) views the recent developments of Muslim politics in the post-Arab Spring as a "Neo-Islamism trend" since one of the most obvious outcomes of the 2011 Arab revolutions is the rise of Islamists and Islamic-oriented political parties. The regime changes in the Middle East and North Africa in late 2010 (starting with Tunisia and followed by Egypt) and the role performed by the Islamists in these countries added new urgency to developing fresh approaches to Muslim politics (Dagi 2013, p. 72). For Chamkhi, this trajectory represents a new modified path of Islamist political thought called "neo-Islamism"- which is considered more a tactical strategy than a new ideology. To emphasise his words:

> ...[By] acknowledging that Islamism and Islamists did not completely fail [in the post-Arab Spring events]...we distinguish these post-Arab Spring Islamists from traditional Islamists by classifying them as neo-Islamists (Chamkhi 2014, p. 460).

Neo-Islamism can be understood as a tendency that emerged within majority Islamist movements to use liberal sets of concepts - for tactical and strategic purposes - whilst pursuing and adjusting the original traditional aims. Six main trends were identified by Chamkhi as the characteristics of neo-Islamism. The trends are explained as follows:

1. *The renewal of religiosity* – Increased secularization in private and social life, as well as day-to-day private and public religious practices among neo-Islamists.

2. *Gradualism of Islamisation* – Neo-Islamists believe that small changes towards Islamisation are better than rapid ones. These could be undertaken via an official or unofficial adoption of the Turkish AKP-style of 'pretended secularism'. 'Open-door policies' for membership could be proposed for any citizen regardless of religious practice. The focus of political parties is more on the quantity rather than the quality of members' religious devotion.

3. *Modernising Islam* – The concept of modernisation and tools of modernity are well accepted by Neo-Islamists as they argue that Islam is compatible with modern scientific inventions, technologies and the democratic and pluralist values that originated from the West.

4. *Nationalist Islamism* – Some neo-Islamists refuse to consider the Ummah being brought to a single Islamic transnational state. Their political and economic objectives are directed exclusively to the nation-state in which they reside.

5. *Pragmatic relations with the Western world* – In general, neo-Islamist leaders from Ennahda, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood and AKP were seen as eager to have positive and 'enjoyable' relationships with the Western bloc, particularly USA and the European Union states.

6. *Moderation* – Although to transform and practice the "middle-path' is a long journey for the Islamist, within the Tunisian neo-Islamist context, they have partially succeeded in presenting their commitment to democracy, flexibility, pluralism, justice, balance and tolerance.

Following the development of several Islamist movements in the post-Arab Uprisings, the idea of neo-Islamism based on Chamkhi's definition reflects the most modern trends and features of Islamist political parties. From all the characteristics mentioned, moderation was perceived as a core element of neo-Islamism during the post-Arab Spring events. Nevertheless, his study focuses mainly on Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood branches across the Arab world and thus the scope seems to be limited, which indirectly leaves a question about the other parts of Muslim Brotherhood inspired movements like Malaysia's

PAS, Indonesia' PKS or Pakistan's *Jamaat-e Islami*. Indeed, there is no argument to claims about an upsurge of Islamism in the post-Arab Spring, as agreed by many scholars including Al-Anani (2012), Bradley (2012), Haynes (2013) and Schenker (2015).

Matesan and Chamkhi's study indicated that the Arab Uprisings has affected the ideologies and activity of some Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa particularly in Egypt, giving them a new brand of 'progressive' Islamist identity. The question that arises here is: do Muslims support the Islamists now? Charles Kurzman and Didem Türkoğlu (2015) sought the answer through observations, as well as updated empirical data on Islamic political parties' performance in the post-Arab Uprisings in legislative elections towards the end of 2014 in 15 respective countries. Surprisingly, although the political environment in which these parties operate had changed dramatically, their study showed that Islamist parties had actually been less successful in parliamentary elections after the Arab Uprisings. Kurzman and Türkoğlu (2015, p. 100) thus hypothesized that "the freer the election, the worse Islamist parties progressed". This hypothesis could be challenged if it included the latest developments of Islamist parties and political situations in other regions, for example in Malaysia, where the ruling Pakatan Harapan coalition is struggling hard to maintain the support and status quo since the emergence of a new Malay-Muslim opposition coalition – the UMNO and PAS alliance. Regarding the trend in Islamist parties' political platforms, the authors stated that Malaysia's PAS retained a stable position on 'liberal directions' (based on several issues coded in the study), for example – the implementation of Sharī'ah, human rights, Jihād and democracy. However, since 2015 this has no longer been the case, as PAS has officially proposed the implementation of Sharī'ah Criminal Law in the state legislative hall of Kelantan.

On the whole, one can find commonalities in the studies by Matesan (2012), Chamki (2014) and Kurzman and Türkoğlu (2015) as regards the emergence of interconnectedness between the post-Arab Spring phenomenon and the development of Islamist movements and parties. Indeed, the current presence of Islamists in a national political arena seems to be welcomed and can be considered as part of development of the larger Arab Muslim societies. However, in other places and outside the region, scholars such as Sadiki (2015) and Saikal and Acharya (2014) have suggested that impacts from the political upheavals in the

Arab world could possibly be felt in other parts of the world, specifically in Asia. The following sub-section will highlight previous crucial work on the Arab Uprisings and its worldwide reactions and implications.

## The Arab Uprisings and Worldwide Responses

In the few years that have passed since the Tunisian Jasmine Revolution, the Middle East and North Africa has continued to experience momentous changes. Most notable of these, are the consequences of the Arab Uprisings which continue to have enormous impact across the region and the wider world (Fawcett, 2016). Various scholars and researches have wrote the possible impact of the Arab Uprisings towards global community. For instance, in 2015, Sadiki publishes a Handbook of the Arab Spring, which also includes a collection of essays on the Uprisings in a global context – South Africa, North America, Nordic, Europe and India. A year before that, in 2014, Amin Saikal and Amitav Acharya have also contributed an edited volume of their own entitled *Democracy and Reform in the Middle East and Asia: Social Protest and Authoritarian Rule after the Arab Spring,* which addresses inter-regional implications of the Arab revolts in relation to Asia, particularly in terms of their ideological influence on opposition groups and the prospects for democratic transition in a variety of authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes.

As pointed out by the authors, Asia is considered as the region that is most affected by the Uprisings, due to issues of democracy and democratisation which remain blooming and striking as a key factor for the region's security. Furthermore, in many Asian states, one can find experiences of 'people's power' revolutions that toppled some long serving autocratic rulers - for example the case of the Philippines (1986 and 2001), Indonesia (1998), and Thailand (2006-08) – which suggest the Arab Uprisings might have a 'snowballing effect' in Asia (Saikal & Acharya 2014). This edited volume, which the reviewer has reviewed in a previous publication (Saidin 2018a) is unquestionably significant as regards to recent implications of the Arab Uprisings on several Asian countries for instance Iran, India, China, Myanmar, Indonesia, Singapore and Central Asia. However, it is worth mentioning that the book does not consider detail views among the youth, opposition parties, political activists, civil society groups and NGOs in those countries and thus loses its touch from the Islamist perspective almost entirely.

In order to explore the global reactions and implications of the Arab Uprisings, there needs to be close examination of numerous case studies of regions or countries which have responded to or been affected by the phenomenon. Europeans were seen as enthusiastically embracing the recent wave of popular protests and revolts in the Arab world (Asseburg 2013). According to Muriel Asseburg – a Euro-Mediterranean expert who was based in Berlin - European citizens interpreted the unprecedented events in the Middle East and North Africa as a welcome opportunity for the liberalisation of political and economic systems, which would lead to long-term stabilisation. The European officials and policy-makers viewed the events as a starting point for an establishment of strong bilateral relations between the EU and its Arab neighbours. However, due to the Eurozone's financial crisis, the European Union has lacked major influence in the post-Arab Spring era. The impact of European monetary problems has rapidly eroded the willingness of EU member states to contribute significantly to the agenda of Arab transformation via the '3Ms' mechanism - that is, money, market access and mobility (Asseburg 2013, pp. 47-48).

Within the same Caucasus region, it seems Russia too did not want to miss an opportunity to react to the developments of the Arab Uprisings. For Russia, it seems that being in a sceptical and pessimistic position is acceptable as a way to deal with the Arab Uprisings developments. As reported by Roland Dannruether, although they initially welcomed the popular demands for political reform throughout the MENA, Moscow finally rejected the US-Western idea of associating the Arab Uprisings with a positive process of political transition and democratisation. Instead, these dramatic events were negatively viewed as strengthening and consolidating Islamist extremism, which could undermine stability, not just in the Middle East, but also potentially within Russia itself. Likewise, the dominant narrative amongst Russian analysts was that the Arab Uprisings was much more a return to the traditional values of Middle Eastern societies, such as incorporating a more Islamic identity rather than a shift into Western-style democracy (Dannreuther 2015, pp. 78-80). It was this fear that drove Putin's administration to implement an uncompromising stance towards the developments in Syria – an action that led Russia to become more influential and emerge as a powerful player in contemporary Middle East and North African affairs.

## The Arab Uprisings and Malaysia

With regard to the 2011 Arab Uprising and its connection with Malaysia, there are several materials published in English that stand out, specifically by: Joseph Liow (2015) on Islamist activism in Southeast Asia (Malaysia and Indonesia) in the post-Arab Spring events; Osman Bakar (2015) on Malaysian responses to the Arab Uprising; Alan Chong (2014) and Nidzam and Kartini (2017) on the question of the "Malaysian Spring"; and Ahmad Al-Battat et al (2013) on the effect of the Arab Revolution on the Malaysian Hospitality Industry. Compilation of Malay publication on the Arab Spring, which is largely based on Wan Kamal and Siti Nurulizah Musa's edited book titled *Arab Spring: Factor and Impact* (2015) is not included in this article since the full review has already been published in 2018 – (Saidin 2018b).

Published in 2015, Joseph Liow – who works on Muslim politics in Southeast Asia - provided up-to-date critical thought on the issue of Islamist activism in Southeast Asia and its connection with the Arab Uprisings. Given the recent increase in Islamist political activism in Malaysia and Indonesia, he agrees that there has been growing interest in observing how developments in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Egypt and Tunisia in the post-Arab Spring era, have affected Islamists in Southeast Asia region. However, the author chose to be sceptical as he argues political mobilization and mass protest which involved Islamists had already taken place much earlier – in the late 1990s during the Asian Financial Crisis - and remains as a 'standard' political scenario compared to the Arab world. He has also cast doubt over the relations between Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa and their counterparts in Southeast Asia, as the links have remained unclear despite potential for deeper ties to be established. For Liow, Islamists in Southeast Asia – in this case Malaysia - have primarily avoided revolutionary approaches for a regime change, since the concept of moderation and accommodation have started to influence the movement's ideology along with its commitment to prioritize the 'democratic' political process – such as by referendum and election. Indeed, participation in the political process has encouraged Islamists to uphold a broader and more inclusive political agenda (Liow, 2015; Ashour, 2010).

However, if we closely view the present situation in Malaysian politics, some of Liow's points seem arguable, although the writing does provide a profound insight on the latest ideological development of the Islamist movement in Malaysia, particularly regarding the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) in the post-Arab Uprising. For example, the author failed to demonstrate whether the unpredictable change in PAS ideology (e.g. the issues of Sharia law and Islamic state formation) and activities (e.g. the establishment of a transnational Islamism network) were due to the impact of the Arab Spring phenomenon. Moreover, his claim that the Arab Uprisings failed to trigger a deepening of relations between Islamist parties in the Middle East and Southeast Asia (Malaysia) seems inconsistent if one looks at the several occasions in both Malaysia and Tunisia when there were formal meetings and gatherings of PAS and Ennahda top-ranked representatives (respectively). Obviously, a large part of the paper concentrates on a 'snapshot' of latest development – the character and content of Islamist parties in Indonesia and Malaysia - without addressing the central issue of the connection between these parties and the post-Arab Spring phenomenon.

Equally significant is *The Arab Spring: Malaysian Responses* by Osman Bakar (2012). He provided observations about the response of ordinary Malaysians to the unprecedented events in the Arab world. As the author points out, many Malaysians considered the eruption of people's protests as something unforeseen. Given the huge numbers of Malaysian students who were studying (tertiary education) in Arab countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Syria, the Malaysian public started to become aware and deeply concerned about the wave of anti-government protests across the Middle East and North Africa. This resulted in the Malaysian government taking immediate steps to airlift more than ten thousand of its students from Egypt and Yemen to Kuala Lumpur. Apart from that response, Osman believes that the Arab Uprisings had a meaningful effect on political awareness in Malaysia, predominantly among the large Muslim population – based on efforts by some groups to 'indigenize' the issues that constituted the core concern of the Arab Uprisings.

Sadly, Osman did not specify which groups fall under the claim and the way he generalizes the political consciousness of the Muslim community without appropriate measurement and empirical data – such as survey or ethnography studies - could possibly suggest these points

to be baseless. In addition Osman also claims that civil society groups and the opposition parties in Malaysia expressed their open support and solidarity with the protesters in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya for the sake of democracy and good governance. For PAS, involvement was also dictated by religious considerations as it hoped that the Muslim Brotherhood would be a key player in the post-Arab Spring politics of the Arab world. Indeed, some of the PAS members did organize a protest near the Egyptian Embassy in Kuala Lumpur in response to the 2013 Egyptian coup d'état**.** However, this does not necessarily imply that all the Islamist political parties, especially the National Trust Party (Amanah) - had the same view on the Arab Uprisings. Again, lack of concrete evidence is apparent in the paper, therefore suggesting a definite exclusive view to his analysis.

The last of the four English publications on the Arab Uprisings from Malaysia's perspective is Ahmad Al-Battat et al's study on how the Arab revolution crisis affected the Malaysian hospitality industry – in particular the hotel and tourism sector. The statistical results from the study showed an increase in number (since 2011 to 2012) of international arrivals from Arab states – Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, UAE, Iraq, Yemen and Egypt - to Malaysia. This suggests that the uncertainties in MENA created positive opportunities for Malaysia to attract more Arab visitors to spend their holiday in the country. In this sense, Malaysia offered numerous attractions to satisfy tourist needs and expectations, along with a good reputation as a safe destination. Besides, since Al-Battat and his team's findings attest that the Arab Uprisings affected the tourism industry in Malaysia, the other sectors including the focus of this research – politics and the Islamist movement – could also have been impacted. This suggests that a proper investigation must be done so that a broad perspective on the Arab Uprisings impact in the context of Malaysia can be achieved.

## Conclusion

All in all, this article has discussed a number of studies on the Arab Spring phenomenon from different contexts and perspectives – mainly regarding its influence and impact on other nations beyond the key players in the Middle East and North African countries. It has also considered international reactions to the events – from government, society and Islamists. There are states and institution that are actively

involved in the post-Arab Uprisings' developments such as European Union, Russia and Iran, while parts of Asia and Southeast Asia continent have shown great interest in the wave of uprisings and mass protests across Middle Eastern countries. It is also evident some countries were neither influenced nor much affected by the phenomenon – both from the government and citizen perspective. Such a study undoubtedly would contribute to the larger body of knowledge on the issues of the post -2011 Arab Revolutions. Perhaps, it would also stand as what Larbi Sadiki (2015) suggests - a 'knowledge production' in the age of the Arab Uprisings, yet from a different angle and context.

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