

Did Food prices Plant the Seeds of the Arab Spring?

Jane Harrigan

Abstract

This paper assesses the extent to which the sharp spikes in global food prices, which occurred in 2007/08 and 2010/11, contributed to the political unrest which swept the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at the end of 2010 and the first half of 2011. This political unrest has been referred to as the “Arab Spring” and the paper argues that although the Arab Spring has been referred to in the Western media as a predominantly politically-motivated uprising against autocratic incumbent regimes, there were important socio-economic underpinnings to the uprising. One such important factor was increasing food prices in many countries of the MENA region. The result of rising food prices, along with other socio-economic factors, such as high levels of unemployment, especially amongst educated youth, was a steady increase in the cost of living and an erosion of living standards. Many incumbent regimes in MENA had for decades maintained their legitimacy via an implicit social contract, whereby the regimes offered cheap subsidised food, housing, utilities and fuel along with guaranteed employment in a bloated public sector in exchange for political loyalty. Sharp rises in domestic food prices from 2007 onwards contributed to an unravelling of this social contract such that citizens in the region were no longer willing to tolerate repressive and autocratic governments. The rise in domestic food prices was linked to global food price increases and is a reflection of the food security status of the MENA region, whereby most countries in the region are heavily dependent on imported food. As a result of the role played by food prices in creating political unrest, many countries in the region are now reappraising their food security strategies in an attempt to place less reliance on global food markets.

This paper does not argue that domestic food price increases were the main contributory factor to the Arab Spring nor does it deny the deep-seated desire for political freedom, dignity and human rights amongst citizens in the Arab world. Other factors, such as political repression, the role of social network media, youth unemployment and a domino effect also played important roles in the uprising. However, political repression and social network media have been present in the region for some time without leading to political upheaval. The Ben Ali, Mubarak and Gadhafi regimes have been tolerated by citizens for decades, so why were they suddenly and violently opposed in 2010/11? This paper argues that one factor that explains the timing of the Arab Spring was rising food prices, which both sowed some of the seeds and acted as an important trigger for the uprising. Acknowledgement of this draws attention to the critical political economy dimensions of food security in the Arab world.

The next section of this paper briefly looks at food security in the MENA region from a macroeconomic perspective and highlights the dependence of MENA countries on global food markets. This is followed by an analysis of how the global food price shocks of 2007/08 and 2010/11 impacted on the MENA region and contributed to the Arab Spring. The last major section of the paper assesses the way in which the political-economy dimensions of food security in the region, including the Arab Spring, have encouraged policy makers to dramatically reappraise their strategies for achieving food security, with an attempt to move away from excessive dependence on commercial food imports in favour of greater domestic food production as well as new controversial programmes of land acquisition in third party countries, especially in sub-Saharan Africa.