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Leon Hadar: Don't Party Like It's 1989

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The uprising in Egypt and challenge to the Middle East's autocratic rulers could have produced a sense of déjà vu for the late German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt. Notwithstanding her reputation as a progressive thinker, Arendt believed that the erosion in the power of Europe's conservative ruling elites and the strong national states they controlled helped set the stage for rise of totalitarianism and the horrific wars that engulfed Europe in the first part of the 20th century.

As Arendt pointed out in her classic study *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the inability of these ruling elites in France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, and the Slavic states to retain their legitimacy in the face of waves of nationalist convulsions ignited by “the people”—the opening chapter being the uprisings of 1848—led to the collapse of the post-Napoleonic European order that had been negotiated in the Congress of Vienna. This created the conditions for the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian, German, and Russian empires and resulted in decades of tyranny and bloodshed. A direct line connects the “Spring of Nations” and the wars of the last century.

From that perspective, the protests in Egypt may not mark the beginning of a peaceful transition to liberal democracy along the lines of what happened in the former Soviet bloc in 1989. Instead, the insurgencies in the Middle East look more like the revolts of 1848, the start of a long and chaotic era that will not necessarily bring about political and economic progress. The narrative that romances the revolution could be replaced with a much more complex story, one with no happy ending...

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