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Can statistics predict a revolution? Could we have foreseen the turmoil in Egypt and Bahrain by poring over tables of data that tell us about income, average age and literacy?

We thought we'd try.

We asked three Canadian academics — from the University of Waterloo, Carleton University and the University of Toronto — to gather their indicators of unrest in North Africa and the Middle East.

They looked at Internet access, indicators of democracy (mostly lack of it), corruption and other factors. This is what they found — and no, they didn't agree — with the results shown in the charts.

Bahrain and Tunisia are lower on [Mark Sedra's index of vulnerability](#) than he had expected. Bahrain is an absolute monarchy with no democratic institutions and a parliament that can be appointed and dismissed by the king. In Bahrain, a Sunni minority rules over the Shia majority. Choice positions in government and the military invariably go to Sunnis.



Iraqi Kurds protest to demand the ouster of the local government and better basic services in Sulaimaniya, 260 km northeast of Baghdad, February 19, 2011. People protested for political reforms in Iraq's semi-autonomous Kurdistan region on Saturday while demonstrators in Baghdad rallied for the rights of widows and orphans.

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"There's a lot of anger over the lack of democracy ... and a lot of criticism, even among some Sunni moderates, that the monarch should open up to democratic reform," says Sedra, a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation at the University of Waterloo. But this kind of political sentiment is difficult to capture in statistical analysis.

Meanwhile, the economic indicators are good in Bahrain and that makes the kingdom seem less vulnerable to an uprising. So good that the GDP per person is an impressive \$40,000 and the government is striving to see that the disposable income of every household in Bahrain doubles by 2030.

Tunisia, on the bottom third of the index, was seen as a success story in North Africa. But despite its perceived stability — it was a popular destination for tourists — there was animosity toward its recently abdicated leader, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, who ruled the country for 24 years. That animosity, too, is not measured, Sedra says.

Sedra notes the importance of triggering events. The self-immolation of Tunisian fruit seller, Mohammed Bouazizi, who had been much abused by authorities, was precisely the trigger to set off a revolution. But again that was not measurable.

"I think it was the lack of political freedom, the oppression and abuse by security forces, and antagonism toward the state that were the main drivers of regime change," he says.

Sedra used 12 measurements, which received weightings of 5 and 10 per cent each, to create his index.

[David Carment and his colleague Teddy Samy](#) look at all kinds of data to understand a country's stability or, as they call it, its "fragility" index. Carment and Samy, professors at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs at Carleton University, argue that indicators of human rights and freedoms are more powerful markers of a country's stability than just economic indicators.

Tunisia and Egypt have progressed in some areas, including economic and human development, Carment says. "Yet in the end we know that Tunisia's and Egypt's people were still not happy despite economic gains and increasing wealth. What our data shows is that people are not just demonstrating for a lack of economic opportunity or poor social services. They have been challenging the very legitimacy of the regime itself."

Carment and his researchers looked at three baskets of indicators. The basket he calls "authority" measures the rule of law, economic growth, a government's stability and security. The basket called "capacity" has data on how a government looks after its people: there are facts on employment, gross domestic product per capita, literacy, infant mortality and education.

But it is the third basket, "legitimacy," that holds data that is likened to the canary in the coal mine.

It tells Carment how a government relates to its citizens. Are there democratic institutions and a free press? How does it stand on human rights, corruption and women's role in society?

"If you track these measures over time, the underlying fault line is not in economic performance but in measures of legitimacy," Carment says. It's these human rights issues that drive citizens to the streets to challenge authority, he argues.

"Problems arise when these countries remain under authoritarian control past their due date. They are ruled by a narrow group of cronies, with corruption ... and nepotism deeply engrained."

He notes that when countries are ranked by legitimacy only (the key factor in unrest and uprisings), Saudi Arabia moves up to fourth place, behind West Bank/Gaza, Yemen and Iraq. It's followed by Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon and Morocco.

His project, called the [Country Indicators for Foreign Policy](#) project has been made available to the federal government.

"My concern is there is no reason Canada should be caught by surprise when things begin to unravel. This information is widely available, but it's not clear the government is listening to anyone other than itself."

In her country analysis, [Janice Stein](#), director of the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto, gives heaviest weighting — 65 per cent — to measurements that describe a lack of economic opportunity. These indicators show the gap between rich and poor, youth unemployment and degree of urbanization. (In Algeria, for example, youth unemployment is more than 50 per cent.)

"The Arab world is a young society, unlike parts of Asia, such as Japan, or Europe," she says. "If societies are unable to create economic opportunity for young people — they can't get married, they can't buy houses — there is huge instability built into the system."

She adds it's important to measure urbanization, as the rural poor flock to cities in search of work, which is happening in Egypt and Tunisia. It's aggravated by sharply skewed income distribution.

"You have highly visible wealth literally in the face of a large number of urban unemployed. And that's incendiary."

Stein says she would have chosen these indicators even before the upheaval in Tunisia and Egypt.

"The gravest national security threat," she says, "is unemployed teenage men."

Stein gives lack of democracy and press censorship a 10 per cent weight in her index. "It's layered onto economic dissatisfaction and you have no space to ventilate political grievances. That occurs in closed regimes and that's when pressure builds and the top flies off."

Her third bundle of data includes social media — Facebook and Internet access — and receives a 25 per cent weight. "It provides a platform, builds community, allows people to share information and organize around repressive states."

While Bahrain tops the country list in Internet and Facebook use, it's low on the unrest index. Bahrain is an anomaly, she notes. "The list tells us it's not vulnerable, but we see them shooting people on the streets."

The data to capture the political situation in Bahrain, where a minority rules over the majority, isn't measured, she explains.

Bahrain is ruled by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa and his government, who are Sunni Muslim, while the majority of citizens are Shia Muslim. "The ruling majority protects its economic privilege," she says. "Wealthy Sunnis have been in power and have utter contempt for the much poorer Shia majority."