



Arab Societies Strike Back

THE UNIMAGINABLE HAPPENED. Hosni Mubarak, who ruled longer than any leader since modern Egypt's founder, Muhammad Ali (who died in 1849), was toppled by 18 days of massive popular protests enabled by powerful new weapons – Facebook and Twitter, interacting with cell-phone instant messaging and photo uploading, YouTube and the ubiquitous, round-the-clock feedback and cheerleading of Al-Jazeera TV.

Triggered by the “Jasmine Revolution,” against Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, Egypt's “People's Revolution” has sent shock waves reverberating across the region. The long-established maxim that authoritarian Arab regimes possessed the wherewithal to dominate indefinitely their restive but politically impotent societies proved to be no longer universally valid. Ruling elites and emboldened opposition forces each hastened to draw the appropriate lessons. From Algeria and Syria to Yemen and Bahrain, unnerved regimes announced economic and political reforms, while also sharpening their proverbial swords.

From below, social and political forces quickly began organizing their own “days of rage” protests. In Iran, two years after the violent suppression of large-scale protests over falsified presidential election results, both the regime and the opposition Green movement sought to appropriate Mubarak's deposal for their opposing agendas.

Questions abound: How had societal discontent in Tunisia and Egypt been suddenly translated into successful action? How vulnerable were other regimes to similar strategies? Was this the first stage of a larger democratic revolution, the long-delayed arrival of what American political scientist Samuel Huntington termed the “third wave” of democratization which swept across Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia more than two decades ago? What will be the nature of state-society relations in post-Mubarak Egypt? What will be the role of the military? The Muslim Brotherhood? The direction of Egypt's foreign policy, its effect on other regional actors, and on the relations with the US?

In retrospect, at least one thing is clear: the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes committed just about every possible misstep over the last

decade, at a time when they were in a position of strength. Instead of reaching out to political and social forces to give them a stake in an evolving, reforming system of government, they became even more closed, corrupt and deaf to the rising discontent. Egypt went through the motions of institutional reform, while in practice crushing all challenges, from the liberal secular stream to the Muslim Brotherhood, from the *kefaya* (“Enough”) protests of 2004-05 to labor activists in 2008, with the last straw being the November 2010 parliamentary elections, which gave the ruling National Democratic Party more than 95 percent of the seats.

More than ever, Egypt looked like a *gum-lukiya* (monarchical republic), with an aging president preparing to hand power over to his son Gamal, who together with his cronies in the economic sphere had accumulated vast wealth in Egypt's ostensibly open economic environment.

A new Gallup Survey on Global Wellbeing provides one indication of the plight of both countries' citizens. The vast majority in both countries reported that they were either “struggling” (77 percent in Tunisia, 71 percent in Egypt) or “suffering” (9 percent in Tunisia, 19 percent in Egypt), this at a time in which the GDP in both places was rising substantially. Reversing this trend will be a daunting task for successor governments, especially in Egypt.

Can popular protests of the same magnitude occur elsewhere, and produce the same results? While political pan-Arabism, the galvanizing, quasi-messianic ideology of the 1950s and 1960s, has long been dismissed by Arabs and non-Arabs alike as an unworkable ideology, the overwhelmingly youthful populations across the Arab Middle East and North Africa are interconnected, literally, in ways unimaginable just a few years ago.

The simple messages of the two revolutions – democracy, freedom, dignity and justice – resonate loudly and widely. Nonetheless, the mix of factors – political, economic, sectarian, tribal – which underpin the wave of demonstrations and demands sweeping the region varies from place to place. The Jordanian authorities are being targeted from rival directions – both their East Bank tribal backbone



AVI KATZ

and the Islamic movement, which draws much support from the Palestinian component of society.

Unrest in Bahrain has a strong Sunni vs. Shi'ite dimension. The Yemeni government is confronting multiple rebellions and significant domestic opposition even in the capital. Violent protests have long been a staple of Algerian life, but the lack of social and political cohesion among the regime's disparate opponents (Kabyle Berbers, liberals, Islamists, secular parties, alienated youth) and its possession of oil and gas wealth gives it breathing room. Morocco suffers from many of the same socioeconomic ills of its neighbors, but the monarchy has been more adroit in co-opting and managing the variety of currents (Islamist, Berber, established political parties, liberals), and thus far avoided the regional trend.

From a comparative perspective, both Tunisia and Egypt possess higher degrees of “stateness” than other Arab states – well-defined national territorial identities, traditions of centralized government predating colonial rule, and relatively homogeneous populations. Paradoxically, their higher degree of social and political cohesion, once thought to be an asset for the regimes, rendered them more vulnerable to being deposed, once the fear factor was broken and a critical mass of sustained protest was achieved.

This cohesion may work to both countries' benefit as they begin to tackle the daunting task of translating the euphoria of their revolutions into lasting achievements. Building new, more just, and more genuinely democratic systems, which can address the countries' underlying social and economic ills, will be infinitely more time-consuming, and more challenging, than toppling two aging autocrats.

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