

TURMOIL IN THE ARAB WORLD

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"How beautiful was the republic – under the monarchy" was a saying popular during the turmoil of the French Revolution. The Revolution, symbolized by the storming of the Bastille, aimed at achieving Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. Instead, they gave France – and much of Europe – Jacobin terror, right-wing counter-terror, decades of war and eventually Napoleonic tyranny. A similar challenge now faces the Middle East, where most Arab countries are facing massive upheavals.

Historically speaking, what is now happening is without precedent in the Arab world. For the first time, some Arab authoritarian regimes have been toppled, and others are threatened by mass demonstrations calling for freedom and democracy. Nothing like this ever happened in Arab countries, which have known military coups d'état and different sorts of putsches, but never popular revolutions. When a democratic wave brought down in the 1990 non-democratic regimes in Eastern Europe, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, nothing of the sort happened in the Arab Middle East. Now it has occurred, and it is a great achievement. Tahrir Square has become a symbol for both hope and People's Power.

Yet, while most Arab regimes appear threatened, only two authoritarian rulers – Bin Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt – have been deposed, theirs have been relatively "soft" autocracies. Much more oppressive and ruthless rulers – Qaddafi in Libya, Assad in Syria, Saleh in Yemen – though seriously threatened, have proven until now much more resilient in suppressing dissent and popular opposition. Even in tiny Bahrain the Sunni minority dynasty has for now succeeded in maintaining its rule over a Shia majority population, albeit with help from neighboring Sunni-led countries.

Yet, even in Tunisia and Egypt, bringing down autocratic rulers – a dramatic one-time act - may be easier than constructing and consolidating a democratic regime which is a lengthy and arduous process.

Looking at post-1989 developments in Eastern Europe may provide a helpful compass for comparison. When communism in those countries collapsed, their systems, despite some obvious differences, had the same characteristics: they were one-party dictatorship, with state control over the economy, education, and the media. Yet, today they are very different from each other: Poland, Czech Republic and Hungary succeeded in navigating a successful transition to a consolidated democracy and a functioning market economy, while Russia reverted to a neo-authoritarian system, and the Central Asian former Soviet

Republics have all developed various sorts of "sultanistic" forms of government.

The reason for these differences is simple: democratic transitions mean not only elections, but their success depends on a number of pre-conditions: the existing of a civil society, previous traditions, actual or remembered, of representation, pluralism, tolerance and individualism, the limited role of religion, and effective institutional conditions for a multi-party system. Where these conditions exist, a transition to democracy can succeed; where these conditions are missing, the chances – as in Russia – for a successful transition to a consolidated democracy are slim.

Developments in Egypt will be crucial, as it is not only the largest Arab country, but also because some of the mentioned pre-conditions appear to have a stronger presence there than in other countries. Yet even in Egypt, the challenges are enormous. With early elections in September, there is serious doubt whether opposition groups will have the time, means and experience to organize effective political parties. At the moment, only the army – which has effectively ruled the country since 1952 – and the Muslim Brotherhood, which has the widest social networks, appear as serious players. Will the army, which now has the monopoly of power paradoxically legitimized by the massive demonstrations which toppled Mubarak, be willing to give up the enormous political and economic clout it has amassed over decades? One hears about a possible modus vivendi between the army and the Muslim Brotherhood, and some Tahrir Square activists are already demonstrating against such an incongruous yet possible alliance. And in Libya, if Qaddafi falls, are there enough democratic forces in such a highly tribalized country to serve as building blocks for a functioning democracy?

The issue, one should underline, is not Islam as such. In Europe, the Church was until recently the greatest enemy of democracy and liberalism. Yet, today Christian Democratic parties are one of the pillars of European democracy. Like Christian churches, Islam can also change, and Indonesia and Turkey may be an example for such a possibility. But in a context where a fundamentalist Islamic organization like the Muslim Brotherhood is the strongest organization in society with very little effective counter-veigling powers creates a serious challenge.

How will all this impact the Israeli-Palestinian peace process which appears stuck? It may be difficult to know, especially as the fundamentalist Hamas now controlling Gaza may be encouraged by the rising power of its Muslim Brotherhood parent organization in Egypt. The recent escalation along Gaza's border with Israel may suggest such a dangerous development. As for Israel, it initially responded in a confused way to the democratic upsurge in Tunisia and Egypt. Now, its leaders maintain that they would welcome democracy changes as a guarantor for peace and common values but express skepticism whether such developments are about to happen.

Skepticism is in place also looking at the unknown consequences of Western military intervention in Libya. It may have been asked for by the Arab League and legitimized by the UN Security Council yet the outcome is far from certain. Whatever happens in Libya will have repercussions all over the region.

The road to democracy has always been rocky – look at a century of upheavals in Europe and the difficulties the US faced when dealing with slavery and the rights of its black population. Hopefully there will be a light at the end of the tunnel in the Arab Middle East as well, but the tunnel may be a long one.