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The Arab revolt: transformation to transition

Nadim Shehadi, 22nd February 2011

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A hurricane of change is blowing through the Arab world. Even now, many Arab regimes are still in denial. But it also challenges the west to grasp a new political reality, says Nadim Shehadi.

About the author

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The Arab democratic revolution, if that is what it proves to be, is spreading. The experiences of protest and change in Tunisia and Egypt, Bahrain and Morocco, Libya and Yemen may vary substantially, as most probably will their political outcomes; yet they also seem to be components of a great collective shift, which will have reverberations far beyond the region.

Even in the midst of tumultuous events it is not too early to start thinking about what comes after, and in particular how international policy-makers should best respond to and intervene in the coming Arab order.

The current signs are less than encouraging, in two ways. First, there is a tendency for political and media attention to focus on where the most dramatic action is, but then to move on quickly when it is over - the very time when sustained engagement (as now in Tunisia) is most needed. It is not enough to cheer for the revolution while it is happening. The aftermath, the transition process from authoritarianism to democracy, is the crucial moment; and this is when a country needs most help. This is also the time when people power alone cannot guarantee a change in the right direction, and when bad management in a critical period can backfire.

Second, the epic events in the Arab world reveal a potentially dangerous tension. Across the region, people seem to be craving freedom and democracy at a time when the west has lost interest in promoting these values. The east is looking west (at least in terms of its aspirations), but the west is looking away. Will the twain find a meeting-point in their objectives in the difficult period to come?

From romance to reality

What happened in Tunisia and Egypt, and may yet happen in the rest of the Maghreb and elsewhere in the Arab world, is the collapse of an order that had long had lost its legitimacy. The Tunisian experience is exemplary, in that the trigger for the fall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali seems to have been a radical awakening of the population so powerful as to convince the

president and his coterie that it was all over and that fighting back was useless.

The abstract and romantic part of the process is that many Tunisians' dream of change and freedom to speak is being fulfilled - and that others in the Arab world are inspired to follow suit. But this phase, in Tunisia and elsewhere, is not the end of the story, but only the beginning. The hard reality of negotiating and creating a new order must follow, to fill the vacuum of power and build the institutions that can ensure better governance. This involves huge challenges and requires substantial support from outside.

The starting-point, in most of the Arab states, is that political society has been suppressed for decades and needs to be rebuilt from scratch. Even civil society, political parties and the non-governmental sector (where they exist) are compromised by having had to adapt to the realities of an authoritarian regime; they need help to move quickly towards a healthy pluralist environment.

The problems of transition are thus multiple. There are issues of transitional justice: what to do with the old regime and reform the security sector, how to promote reconciliation and allow society to move on. There are questions of fair democratic competition: after so many years when real politics have been semi-comatose the most effective operators are often Islamist parties, which in addition benefit from association with and protection from the mosque.

But addressing all these matters should be made easier by the fact that the impulse of the Arab revolts are for freedom, justice and accountable government. These values echo those espoused by Europe and the United States, and represent enough of a shared foundation for the western powers to be seen as supportive of the process.

The US and western Europe have significant experience in managing transitions; in the case of the Marshall plan after the second world war, it bound them together. The European Union on its own account has also led various transitions: in Spain and Portugal's move from authoritarian rule, in the enlargement process that transformed east-central Europe. And the EU's neighbourhood policy (ENP) is intended precisely to apply the lessons gained from enlargement to help reform the countries just beyond the union's boundaries.

European security, in Javier Solana's dictum, was best promoted were Europe surrounded by a "ring of well-governed states". In practice, the ensuing approach developed bilateral "action plans" in collaboration with the regimes themselves. These plans will now need to be renegotiated with the Arab world's ambitious agents of change that are now or will soon be in government.

The transition handicap

But precedents can mislead as well as guide. The post-1989 transition in Europe and the early signals of a similar process in the Arab world seem are likely to be different at the outset in three main ways. They can be characterised in terms of visions, competition, and timing.

Visions

Both sides of the European transitions at the end of the cold war had the objective that the post-Soviet states (as with Iberia and Greece a generation earlier) should move towards becoming liberal democracies, and ultimately members of the European Union bound by its institutional-legal framework and principles. Such consensus in or regarding the Arab world cannot be guaranteed, despite the consonance of values referred to above. The transition is

also likely to feature a competition between visions, each presenting a direction and model to fill the vacuum created by regime collapse.

Some influential political currents are already calling for western-style democracies and governance. But there is also support for Islamists of various kinds; and remnants of the ancien regime will learn new tricks and use the new system to attempt a comeback (the examples of Ukraine and Lebanon show how this can be done). After so many years of semi-comatose political existence, it is only natural that at a certain point the awakening will be disoriented and look in different directions. What is needed is a mechanism to manage the diversity.

Competition

There will also be international and regional competition for influence in the Arab world during the transition. In the case of the enlargement of the European Union to the south and east, the European commission was alone in planning and implementing the required reforms; again, the Arab world's inheritance means that no single legitimate authority is likely to be available.

Instead, there will be competition. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar and Iran will probably step in to support different brands of Islam; there are already signs of that in Tunisia and Egypt. Al-Jazeera is attempting to take credit for the first Catholic revolution; Syria claims the various risings to be in line with its own anti-American and anti-Israeli stance; Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei seeks to interpret the events as an Islamic revolution.

So the west will not have things its own way, and must focus soon on how best to support the transition. It is not true that a stance of non-interference and of leaving everything to homegrown reform is the best way to ensure a good outcome; on the contrary, this needs to be argued for, worked for, and paid for.

Timing

In one sense, the long-awaited Arab democratic revolution comes into being at an unfortunate time. The dominant mood in both Europe and the United States has been shifting towards more "realism" in foreign policy, effectively a willingness to engage and make deals with unpalatable regimes for the sake of stability and self-interest.

The corollary is a move away from a positive projection of democratic values, reflected in decreased emphasis on and funding of active democratisation projects. The reluctance to put these at the centre of foreign-policy objectives reflects the bitter legacy of the George W Bush administration's "freedom agenda". But it is not clear that a more distant and "realist" policy will serve the Arab peoples any better.

The new partners

Tunisia and Egypt, Bahrain and Yemen, Morocco and Libya are in transition - albeit at different stages, in different ways, and with (in all likelihood) different outcomes. The western perceptions of what is happening needs to change to take account of the movement on the ground. This is easier said than done: ideas and policies that have evolved slowly are hard to change, even when shown to be wrong or bypassed by history.

When events are moving so rapidly, last week's questions can very soon look ancient. In the week after the Egyptian revolt erupted, much attention focused on the opposition figure Mohamed ElBaradei (is he a strong leader, will he have the backing of the army, can he

unify the opposition?). The questions were outdated before they were asked. If real change is to happen, there will be democratically elected politicians, not strong leaders; they will probably be elected by a small margin, not the classic 97.6% of the past. They will be criticised and contested; consensus and enforced national unity are *depassé*.

The Arab political awakening means that old words should acquire new values: political crises, some instability, paralysis, bickering mediocre and opportunistic politicians, are all part of the new good. Division is a sign of strength not weakness, for it means the system can absorb the various political currents. There will be fewer reliable allies, who can be tarnished - and become election losers - precisely for supporting a bad policy.

In the end, change in the Arab world means that western policy-makers have to change too. The west has preferred to work with dictators. When their Arab allies no longer fit that description, a new phase of history with all its challenges and opportunities will begin,

Sideboxes

'Read On' Sidebox:

Dirk Vandewalle, *[A History of Modern Libya](#)* ^[9] (Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Tarek Osman, *[Egypt on the Brink: From Nasser to Mubarak](#)* ^[10] (Yale University Press, 2010)

[Middle East Research and Information Project \(MERIP\)](#) ^[11]

John Keane, *[The Life and Death of Democracy](#)* ^[12] (Simon & Schuster, 2009)

[Democracy Digest](#) ^[13]

Philip Stephens, "[History is on the side of democracy](#)" ^[14] (*Financial Times*, 21 January 2011)

Hisham Matar, *[In the Country of Men](#)* ^[15] (Penguin, 2007)

Luis Martinez, *[The Libyan Paradox](#)* ^[16] (Columbia University Press, 2007)

Sidebox:

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