

The Arab Spring –Is it a Revolution?

Michael Emerson

22 December 2011

In June we did a first stocktaking of the Arab Revolution and promised to continue a monitoring of developments at six-monthly intervals.

The score so far is three outright regime changes (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya), with two more in the pipeline: Yemen experiencing a slow regime change of uncertain destination, and with Syria into its eighth month of bloody repression. Note that all of these have been republics, whereas the monarchies of the region (Morocco, Jordan and the six Gulf states) have been spared so far, all making concessions to head off uprisings, either monetary manna in the case of the petro-monarchies, or some tentative political concessions in the non-petro-monarchies. Qualitatively, the general observation is that the street has lost its fear, while by the same token the authoritarian leaderships themselves became fearful for their future, if not for their lives.

Is it warranted to call this a Revolution? Scholars of revolutions differentiate between ‘great revolutions’ on the one hand, and lesser events such as the *coup d’etat*, seizure of power after popular uprisings, civil war and diverse rebellions. All these events have been catalogued, and apparently total 690 greater and lesser revolutions in world history (see Wikipedia’s “List of revolutions”). The great revolutions are those that transform economic and social structures as well as political institutions. The lesser ones just see an uprising that overthrows the leadership. The Arab Spring beginning in 2011 easily passes as a set of lesser revolutions, but now the interesting question is whether it becomes a great revolution.

The Arab Revolution of 2011 surely takes its place in the quite small number of revolutionary episodes in world history that have had major regional or continental dimensions, and involved revolution by contagion between a number of states sharing some historical-cultural-geographical identity: 1789, 1848, 1917, 1989 of course, and the great decolonisation revolutions, first in Latin America between 1811 and 1821, and then in Africa and Asia after World War II. Already on these grounds the Arab Revolution has some claims to ‘greatness’, since the revolutionary fervour swept through all the 17 states from Morocco to Yemen, and very few of the 690 catalogued revolutions were so extensive.

Scholars of the world’s ‘great’ revolutions, and of the political dynamics that follow in their wake, have sobering messages. The seminal work of Crane Brinton, in *The Anatomy of Revolution* (published in 1938), identified one recurrent model or syndrome with a sequence of stages, in which a popular uprising leads to violent confrontation and overthrow of the incumbent regime. Moderate, democratically oriented factions take over initially but fail to

Michael Emerson is Senior Associate Research Fellow at CEPS. This Commentary also appears in the *European Neighbourhood Watch*, No. 77, December 2011.

CEPS Commentaries offer concise, policy-oriented insights into topical issues in European affairs. The views expressed are attributable only to the author in a personal capacity and not to any institution with which he is associated.

Available for free downloading from the CEPS website (www.ceps.eu) • © CEPS 2011

control the political dynamics that have been released. The revolution is taken over by radical forces, which establish control with brutal repression of dissidents and this leads to a new dictatorship that can last for a long time. Brinton worked out this model sequence after a comparative review of several 'great revolutions', with the French and Russian revolutions most plausibly fitting into this mould. One could add the Chinese revolution, starting in 1911 but maturing only after an interval of war into the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution of the 1966 to 1976. Most recently and close to the Arab world, the Iranian Islamic revolution of 1978 also broadly fits the model. World history offers however a plethora of models, of which this is only one, although the track record of the 'great revolutionary model' is undeniably impressive with the French, Russian, Chinese and Iranian revolutions.

In the Arab Revolution the three clear-cut regime changes – Tunisia, Egypt, Libya – are half way into their revolutions. Will they mature into viable democracy, or just dysfunctional democracy, or will they radicalise along the dramatic course of the Brinton model, or relapse into the miserable condition of the failed state?

Tunisia seems so far to be the best candidate for an emerging democratic solution.

In the Egyptian case, however, there is now a four-way struggle for power between moderate Muslim Brotherhood Islamists, radical Salafist Islamists, the army, and secular liberal factions. The confrontations now become ominous, notwithstanding the impressively conducted elections in recent weeks. The army, once the hero of the revolution, has become its enemy. The secular liberals are politically weak. The Salafists have jumped up from the sidelines into a major force.

Where there has been terrible civil war, as in Libya, one has to fear very difficult outcomes. NATO and the West have invested hugely in a democratic outcome, but Iraq is a relevant reference with ongoing violent conflict in a formally democratic setting. For Syria and Yemen the references may also be Iraq, or worse, the failed state of Somalia.

The six petro-monarchies of the Gulf have all avoided regime overthrow, although in Bahrain it became a prospect. All however have for now bought off revolution with monetary manna showered onto the people in great quantities. Yet this stores up trouble for later, creating ultimately unsustainable economies, and when the time comes for detox it will be very painful. Maybe they keep out of serious trouble for a decade more or so. Most of these states make at least slight gestures in the direction of constitutionalisation of the monarchies. More serious steps in the direction of evolutionary constitutionalisation may be under way in Morocco and Jordan, where there is no manna to distribute.

Election results in the last months have shown a clean sweep of successes for Islamist parties, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and for like-minded parties in Tunisia and Morocco, with similar sympathies evident also in Jordan and Kuwait. These parties are often referring to the Turkish AK model of moderate and democratic political Islam, and not radical Islam. If this is sustained and deepened as the leading political norm across the Arab world, replacing decades of repressive authoritarianism, it would qualify as a great, democratic revolution. But not so fast. In the central case of Egypt, confrontation with the army and the spectacular rise of the Salafists signal that all options are open. Don't forget the Brinton model...