

The Limits of Endless Revolution

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SUMMARY

- Every revolution has its own peculiar causes. We should not exaggerate the possibility that the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya will set off a chain reaction throughout the Arab world or the wider Muslim world.
- The activeness many expected to see from Islamic radicals has not been forthcoming so far.
- The Arab governments in Algeria, Jordan, Morocco, Yemen and Oman have correctly judged the situation and agreed to concessions and even dialogue with the opposition as a way of lowering tensions.
- We should not exaggerate the influence of these recent events on the Middle East conflict, because no matter what kind of government emerges in Egypt, it will concentrate its attention above all on domestic issues.
- Authoritarian regimes in Central Asia are using the events in North Africa, especially in Libya, as an added argument in favor of a firm hand guaranteeing stable government in their countries.

Some politicians in Russia have already attempted to call the revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya “orange” (or “tulip”) revolutions, seeing in them similarities to the events in Ukraine (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2005) and Georgia (2003), though what is the logic in such labels? By the same token, one could see citrus-fruit and floral hues in the barricades that went up in Paris in 1789 and Petrograd in 1917.¹ However, these politicians’ worries are understandable: some in the countries of the former Soviet Union are picturing what would happen if this Arab unrest should come their way, and what it would mean for their own political futures.

What actually happened? Nothing extraordinary happened, if we look at the situation with a

bit of common sense. People in these three Arab countries got sick of the poor deal they were getting and decided they had the right to a better life: as the commercial goes, “You’re worth it.”

People were sick of seeing the same old faces running the country. Moammar Gaddafi has been in power in Libya since 1969; Hosni Mubarak has run Egypt since 1981; and Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali came to power in Tunisia back in 1987. They are no longer capable of making any real improvement to systems centered on rule by their own families. The gap between the general public and the narrow circle of the ruling elite is now so deep and so broad that from their palaces on one side, the rulers cannot see the ordinary people with all their problems on the



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other side of the abyss. There was no constitutional means of forcing the rulers to work for society's good, and no legal means of changing the regime in power, and so the people took to the streets. Some think that it was Facebook, Twitter and other new technologies that got them out, but it is the "Arab street", not the Internet that is lighting the fires. In Libya, only 4.2% of the population have Internet access, in Egypt 12.9%, and in Tunisia 27%, while in Kuwait the figure is 34%, in Azerbaijan 24%, and in Saudi Arabia 22.7%, though none of the latter three countries has yet faced revolution. Some commentators think that the Egyptians and Tunisians launched their revolutions after devouring Howard Rheingold's book "Virtual Reality". Information technology and books can certainly help fan the flames. We should not ignore their significance, but neither should we overestimate it. There are, after all, many countries where the latest technology is not in short supply, but no revolutions are on the horizon.

The Tunisian president fled immediately, but Egypt's president held out for three weeks. He seemed not to believe his own eyes, as could be seen from his famous response when a journalist asked, "Do you not want to say goodbye to the people?" to which Mubarak replied, "Why? Are they going somewhere?" As for the former leader of the Libyan Jamahiriya, as Gaddafi renamed his country, he desperately struggled for power, but was doomed.

The overall course of events in these three Arab countries is not especially original, but there have nonetheless been a few unexpected moments. First, the Tunisian and Egyptian leaders' complete isolation stands out. Neither the national elite nor the army stood by them. The tanks in Cairo turned off their engines, and the officers stayed silent, waiting to see who would win, or rather, when and how the regime would fall. Second, despite the people's bellicose mood, the mass looting, pogroms and other excesses that accompany any revolution were fairly minimal in Tunisia and Egypt. The most memorable event was when Egypt's National Museum was robbed and a mummy stolen, but few paid the event much attention in the midst of all the political upheaval. Overall, the public in the two countries showed social maturity, and there was little sign of "frenzied crowds baying for blood."

Even journalists, who were offended after being called enemy agents by the Egyptian revolutionaries, admitted as much. Third (and particularly interesting), was the surprising passivity shown by the Islamic radicals. One could explain their inaction in Tunisia by the fact that their leaders had all been exiled from the country, but many were surprised at how passive the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was. In any event, there was no "Islamist explosion". Aside from Gaddafi, who blamed his problems on Al-Qaeda, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev was probably the only political leader of any note to talk seriously about the danger of religious fanatics coming to power. This can be attributed to the Russian leadership's fears that the events in the Arab world could make ripples in the North Caucasus, where Islamic radicals really are very active, and where people are following the events in North Africa very closely.

However, it would be hasty to make any categorical conclusion that the Islamists' lack of action signifies their complete defeat and departure from the political stage. People have been making such predictions for the last 30 years. The Islamists remain an important part of the Arab and Muslim political spectrum, and expression of social and political protest through Islam still has relevance today. Applied to the present specific context, I would call it a "deferred protest".

The situation is most serious in Libya. Unlike in Tunisia and Egypt, Libya's leader, Gaddafi, did not end up totally isolated, but drew support in the west of the country, in Tripolitania, where people from the Gaddafi tribe (bearing the same name) have their settlements. Gaddafi is battling the insurgents using not just ground forces but also aviation. Realizing that his army cannot be relied on, he called in mercenaries from Chad, Niger and several other African countries, earning him even greater hostility from the Libyan people. This desperate struggle to stay in power is partly because Gaddafi still believes in his own personal charisma and the support of his own tribe. At the same time, he is known as one of the world's most ruthless dictators, who has physically eliminated his opponents (including those abroad), irritating the West, which had learned to tolerate him, but which prefers to deal with Arab politicians of the ilk of the toppled former presidents of Egypt and Tunisia. Gaddafi has had

strained relations with numerous Muslim countries, including Saudi Arabia, and he clearly cannot count on any support from abroad. After using such brutal force in his attempts to put down the uprising, he has become a political pariah, the UN has imposed sanctions on Libya, his family's bank accounts have been frozen, and he faces the prospect of being brought before the International Criminal Court in the Hague. In this situation, Gaddafi, who still retains his official title of "leader of the Libyan revolution" (rather ironically in today's situation), is fighting not just for power but for his own survival. It is not hard to imagine what fate awaits him should he fall into the hands of his opponents.

What will the victors do? First of all, the departure of the former presidents does not mean the revolutions are over. Tunisia saw a new wave of revolution at the end of February (though not as stormy as the first wave), which overthrew the new government formed by Mohammed Ghannouchi.

The new governments will be transition governments made up of a diverse range of political forces. They could include the moderate wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, especially in Egypt. It will not be easy to reach a consensus. In Egypt, the army, which has always played a major political role, is acting as guarantor of stability. The Tunisian army has no such tradition and in some respects the situation there resembles that of Kyrgyzstan, where organizing relations among the victors has proved to be a very difficult process following the country's second revolution in 2010.

As for Libya, the country could split into two or even three parts. Libya, which was put together in 1911 by uniting three territories – Tripolitania, Cyrenaica² and Fezzan – survived as a single entity only through the authority of the Senussa dynasty and then Gaddafi's rule. Gaddafi's departure would inevitably raise the question of Libya's survival as a single country, and this in turn would add tension to the situation in North Africa. The tens of thousands of refugees fleeing Libya are already a big problem for neighboring Tunisia and will inevitably become a real headache for the international community in general.

The next question that not only politicians but also scholars with more abstract thinking are

studying now is whether new political systems can emerge in Tunisia and Egypt, and whether they will lead these countries to abandon authoritarianism and perhaps exchange presidential power for genuine parliamentary rule (again, similar to Kyrgyzstan).

Of course, there is hope for democratic change, but it is too early to celebrate. The process of political transformation is a complex one and fraught with the danger of sliding into reverse. If the new authorities fail to act fast enough to resolve the biggest social and economic problems, they could face the threat of being toppled themselves and replaced by as yet unknown but most likely more radical forces, driven by revolutionary and religious ideas. What's more, past experience in the Muslim world has shown that a normal, competitive electoral system can produce victory for the Islamists, and not necessarily of the most moderate persuasion. A recent example was the Hamas victory in 2006 in Palestine. This scenario is improbable just now, but if the general situation worsens, it will become more likely. Finally, it is possible that the complexities and contradictions of the parliamentary system will lead to deadlock, with the public and elite then demanding a new national leader, a new "father of the nation", as a more familiar and comprehensible institution, in which it is much easier to place hopes for a shining future. In Egypt such a figure would most likely come from within the military, and then we would see history repeat a familiar circle.

Right now, however, people are more concerned about how events in the Arab world will develop, and whether the domino theory will prove correct. Who will be next, in other words? Syria, Jordan, Yemen, Morocco and even Saudi Arabia have all been named as possible candidates. Even Iran has been mentioned, but no new upheavals have happened yet, perhaps in view of the civil war now unfolding in Libya, which has already claimed more than 2,000 lives.

The tide of revolution is ebbing now, and Arab revolutionaries in other countries have not gone beyond demonstrating, calling for their governments' resignation, and minor scuffles that fall far short of real revolution. Tension was highest in Bahrain, where the situation was clearly being fanned by ever-revolutionary Shiite Iran. So far, the Tunisian-Egyptian-Libyan wave of revolution

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has not turned into a great tide sweeping the entire Arab world, much to the disappointment of some journalists.

It is worth noting here the rapid responses that various Arab governments have taken in order to try to avoid revolution. Jordan's King Abdullah II dismissed the government; Morocco's King Mohammad VI has started a more intensive dialogue with the opposition; Yemen's leader, Ali Abdullah Saleh, sent the army out to protect demonstrators; the sultan of Oman, Qaboos Bin Said, promised to create 50,000 new jobs; and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika promised wide-ranging reforms. Bouteflika, who is one of the generation of those who fought for Algeria's independence, has always been pragmatic and could well initiate a handover of power to someone new, all the more so as neither the president nor the public has forgotten the civil war in the 1990s that cost 150,000 lives.

The influence of these revolutions, especially the Egyptian revolution, on the Middle East peace process is overestimated. I am certain that the peace process will proceed at the same pace and in the same direction as now, in other words, it will continue to go around in circles. True, demonstrators in Jordan called on the King to withdraw from the peace process, but these demonstrations were organized by Palestinians. Overall, every country in the Middle East region will concentrate primarily on their internal affairs.

As for the influence that the three Arab revolutions could have on the former Soviet republics, in particular in Central Asia, this has been a trendy subject of discussion over the last month, but any real impact so far is close to zero. Certainly, the forced departure of a couple of Arab leaders aroused a bit of an inferiority complex among some in the former Soviet republics, along the lines of, "Look at how brave and decisive the Egyptians and Tunisians are; what about us?..." But at the same time, most people in these countries remain passive and not ready to take decisive action. The "Libyan effect" has also played a

role in this, similar to the illustrative effect of the civil war in Tajikistan, to which Central Asia's authoritarian rulers constantly alluded, justifying their harsh but reliably stable rule. At the same time, there is reason to believe that these leaders, like Gaddafi, are prepared to take the strongest possible measures to protect their power (suffice it here to remember the way Islam Karimov behaved in Andijan).

Each revolution will continue in asynchronous fashion rather than as a chain reaction, ripening independently in each individual country, fed by internal problems. External influence will always remain a secondary factor. Instead of pointing at foreign designs and scandals in others' backyards, the post-Soviet authoritarian rulers would therefore be better off thinking about real social, economic and political reform that could not only ensure stability (which has long since turned into stagnation), but, most importantly, could also give impetus to the modernization that has become such a trendy term among the Russian political elite.

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NOTES

¹ To be fair, Ben Ali's arrival in power in 1987 was called the "jasmine revolution".

² The real impulse for revolution came from Cyrenaica it seems, where the people were never happy with the unfair way in which oil revenue was divided (in favor of Tripolitania).

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