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From Tunisia to Egypt: implications for North Africa

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Summary

The Tunisian and Egyptian experiences suggest that popular demands in the Middle East and North Africa are genuinely concerned with democratic participation and respect for the individual, precisely in line with Western normative values. Islam conditions the social and cultural environment, but it is not the automatic popular political choice, as European and American public opinion and official rhetoric insist. Instead, moderate political Islam has rejected extremism and adopted positions that embrace democratic outcomes.

The primary objective for Europe and America will be to see stability restored as quickly as possible, whatever the cost. They are likely to endorse a modified hegemonic political

movement in Tunisia and an army-backed regime in Egypt, both of which can guarantee political stability and continuity. Both Europe and the US fear the implications of political Islam because of the false linkage of all aspects of political Islam with extremist violence.

Above all, the US seeks continuity for its Middle East policies; Egypt has been a key component in dealing with Israeli security concerns and Iranian nuclear objectives, and a bulwark against the Islamic republic's supposed challenge to moderate states in the region. However, the one policy that is universally unacceptable to the Arab street is the intolerable blockade on the Gaza Strip, and it will have to go.

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Although the crises in Tunisia and Egypt are still far from being resolved, it is already possible to draw some conclusions from the events that have occurred. At the same time, such conclusions can only be provisional, precisely because the final outcomes will depend on how events develop. However, massive popular pressure has clearly demonstrated that the liberal authoritarian regimes of the Arab world have been hollowed out by their autocratic and corrupt leaderships, making many of them far more vulnerable than anybody had anticipated. One reason is that they have often alienated, not just their populations, but also the crucial instruments of state power – their armies and security forces. How else can we explain, not just the collapse of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, but the pressure for change in Jordan and Yemen?

No domino effect

At the same time, it is also clear that there is not going to be a “domino effect”, as some commentators have claimed. We need to bear in mind that, although the current crises began with mass protests about the escalation in food prices and living costs, the real issue that spurred the political challenge was popular anger towards the disrespect and contempt with which these regimes have treated their populations. “*Hoghra*” (arrogance), along with massive regime corruption, transformed economic concerns about living costs into political demands for governance. It is, therefore, the insensitive and arrogant handling by authoritarian regimes of basic social demands, and the subsequent loss of trust of the armies and security forces in their political leaders, that will determine whether or not the Tunisian revolution acts as a catalyst for political change in other Middle Eastern countries.

In some countries – Iran, Tunisia, Egypt, Algeria and Yemen – regime arrogance has been acute and blatant; in others it has not. Thus in Morocco and Jordan, the monarchies retain popular legitimacy and institutional support, particularly from the army and the security forces, and this has enabled them to ride the storm. That said, King Abdullah of Jordan has been forced to concede government

change, largely because he has ignored poor political governance in the mistaken belief that economic change would drag political evolution in its wake.

Morocco, on the other hand, had long accepted the importance of good governance and respect for human rights, even though the king has become increasingly impatient with parliamentary politics. The Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, are buoyed up by abundant oil and gas revenues which can be used to buy popular support.

Protestors lack clear objectives

The power of mass demonstrations has been impressive; it forced out President Ben Ali within hours of the Tunisian army making it clear that it would not fire on demonstrators; and it took three days to force the Egyptian leader into a humiliating admission that he would go too, albeit at a time of his own choosing. What the demonstrators have not been able to do is articulate clear alternatives, and the lack of coherent organisation and purpose has led to the second stage of the crisis in each country. In Tunisia, admittedly, there was coherence in the organisation of the demonstrations – through local trade union branches and lawyers and human rights groups – but they still have no clear and agreed agenda of what the future should be.

As a result the hard core of the regime in both countries is still struggling to retain power. Tunisia’s Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) party, which has in effect been the country’s sole political party since independence in 1956, seeks to exploit differences between those who seek the construction of new political institutions and those who seek normality and stability through compromise. Although the party is gradually being forced to shed discredited politicians from the Ben Ali regime and has been threatened with suspension, it continues to try to guide the situation in the hope that its party organisation will guarantee victory in the upcoming elections.

Continuity at all costs?

In Egypt, the army, which seeks stability above all, has emerged as the mediator between popular demand for change and the Mubarak regime's attempt – also tried briefly and unsuccessfully in Tunisia – to promote chaos in order to illustrate the virtues of the security regime it once was. Omar Suleiman, the new vice-president and putative successor to Hosni Mubarak, implies continuity even at the cost of cosmetic liberalisation.

This lack of a political project beyond regime collapse, and the generalised objective of political liberalisation and good governance, highlights two concerns: one is that the revolution may be hijacked by an organised political movement, as occurred in Iran in 1979; and the other is that the much-vaunted importance of the “new media” has been powerfully over-stated.

New media stimulate participation but fail to provide coherent structures

It is certainly true that information technology – Facebook, Twitter, mobile telephones and al-Jazeera – have vastly facilitated information flows and thus stimulated popular participation. But, in Egypt, the mobile networks were shut down for three days and still the demonstrations continued, simply because word of mouth continues to be the most effective means of communication.

Indeed, some would argue that the “new media” are a potential threat to popular expression, for they also provide means of generating information about protest that can be turned against the protestors. Nor do they give coherence to the demands that the demonstrators wish to make for they do not facilitate the creation of the effective leadership that social movements in the end require if they are to succeed.

The Islamist alternative

The question of the current and future role of Islamist movements is crucially important. It is clear that they played no part, as movements, in organising the demonstrations, although their members often participated on an individual basis. It is also clear

in both Egypt and Tunisia that the movements have gone out of their way to emphasise that they wish to participate in a democratic future, alongside other political currents.

This approach is consonant with the long-standing political platforms of Islamist groups and there is no a priori reason to doubt their sincerity. Nor do they have the kind of dominant support which would make the alternative agenda of an Islamic state possible. Indeed, moderate Islamist movements in Morocco and Jordan reflect this commitment to a pluralist agenda whilst, in Saudi Arabia, King Abdullah is trying to manage a cautious but determined liberalisation against the entrenched opposition of the *ulama*.

Political Islam's democracy platform

This moderate pro-democracy platform has profound implications, both for the assumptions of regional governments and for external actors such as the European Union, individual European states and the United States. Since 2001, all have collaborated in arguing that behind political Islam lies extremist transnational Islam, and that to tolerate the one is to accept the other, with all the attendant dangers of spill-over effects from the Middle East and North Africa. This argument has also implicitly justified the European and American acceptance of liberal autocracies in the region for decades – stability, even at the price of no democratic representation and disregard for normative values.

However, the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences, rather like that of Algeria in 1988, do not bear this out. On the contrary, they suggest that popular demands in the Middle East and North Africa are genuinely concerned with democratic participation and respect for the individual, precisely in line with Western normative values. Islam, of course, conditions the social and cultural environment, but it is not the automatic popular political choice, as European and American public opinion and official rhetoric insist. And, were political Islam to be the popular choice, how could it be resisted if we are to respect democratic choice?

In fact, most moderate Islamist political movements are increasingly concerned with democratic reform rather than moral rectitude, as the movements in both Morocco and Tunisia demonstrate. Indeed, in recent times, these increasingly complex movements embodying moderate political Islam have rejected extremism and adopted positions that embrace democratic outcomes instead.

European and American ambiguity

Given the normative values espoused by the European Union and European states, together with American objectives (as enunciated in Cairo by Condoleezza Rice in June 2005 and by President Obama in June 2009), it might have been expected that the recent revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt would have been embraced with open arms. This has sadly not been the case, nor is it likely to become so.

Although Europe and America will cautiously endorse political liberalisation because they cannot be seen to oppose it without losing credibility in the region, their primary objective will be to see stability restored as quickly as possible, whatever the cost. They are likely to endorse a modified hegemonic political movement in Tunisia and an army-backed regime in Egypt, both of which can guarantee political stability and continuity.

False linkage between political Islam and extremist violence

There are two major reasons for this. The first is that both Europe and the US fear the implications of political Islam because of the false linkage of all aspects of political Islam with extremist, transnational violence. Public discourse in the American media makes this quite explicit and private conversations within the European Commission have highlighted this as a major cause of hesitancy over embracing recent developments in the Middle East and North Africa.

This false linkage, coupled with continuing belief in the “Arab exception” (the presumed inability of the Arab world to deal with the complexities of democracy), reflects a deep caution in Europe and

America that currently colours all official reaction towards events in Tunisia and Egypt. Allied to this is a quite misplaced fear that democratic change in Tunisia and Egypt will set off a train of instability throughout the region as other populations attempt to emulate those experiences.

The second reason has to do with American policy objectives in the Middle East – policies which, in practice, European states and the Commission endorse largely because of their ongoing commitment to “the transatlantic relationship”. Egypt has been a key component in this respect; in policies dealing with Israeli security concerns and Iranian nuclear objectives, and as a bulwark against the Islamic republic’s supposed challenge, through the “shia arc of extremism”, to moderate states in the region.

The Gaza blockade must go

Of course the degree to which these fears are justified will depend on the outcomes to the complicated political processes currently underway in Tunisia and Egypt. However if, as seems likely, an army-backed regime emerges in Egypt, it will have an interest in maintaining American policy objectives as far as the above-mentioned issues are concerned.

The one policy that is universally unacceptable to the Arab populations is the intolerable blockade on the Gaza Strip, and it will have to go. But the blockade has long been shown to be unviable and no doubt there will be quiet relief in Brussels and Washington, if not in Tel Aviv, that an opportunity to bury an ineffective and morally offensive policy, that should never have endorsed, has now emerged!