

Post-Arab Spring: Political transitions in retreat?

by Mely Caballero-Anthony

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A recent cover of the *Economist* magazine asked: “Has the Arab Spring failed?” More questions along this line will certainly come as the international community follows closely the political developments in the Arab world. Already, many analysts and pundits are wondering how the celebrated Arab Spring of 2011 that led to the breathtaking end of dictatorial regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen could have gone awry.

The rapid descent into political strife and turbulence in these states has rocked the once placid region, with unimaginable violence recently breaking out in Egypt. While nothing compares with the carnage that had been seen in Libya – itself under pressure for a regime change – the turn of events has led many to question the wisdom of the democratic transformations that are taking place in these states. As Egypt’s re-instated military regime struggles to keep order and pull the country back from the precipice of civil war, how do we make sense of these unfolding narratives of the Arab world? And what does this mean for Southeast Asia’s own story of political transitions?

Since the mid-1970s, Southeast Asia has had its own chequered experience of political transitions. From the Philippines’ long and arduous journey to democracy in the early 1980s to Myanmar’s breathtaking democratic reforms after decades under a military junta, the common thread is that transitions are inherently fragile, fraught with difficult challenges, and therefore need to be properly nurtured until democratic processes are consolidated.

Political “transitologists” like Andreas Schedler and Guillermo O’Donnell, writing about the Latin American experience, have pointed out that while dozens of Third World countries went “democratic” between 1980 and 2000, only a few were able to consolidate that status. Most either slid back into autocratic modes of governance or got stuck in so-called “half-way” status. Similar studies have shown that democratic consolidation depends on an array of factors. Pressures by domestic and external parties to allow citizens greater political participation are one part of the equation. Also significant are a gamut of domestic factors affecting political outcomes, including level of economic development, quality of political

leadership, nature of elite bargaining, political institutions, and even political culture.

Beyond elections, there is the difficult task of getting the new players that have entered the political arena to work together and achieve some kind of a consensus that democracy is the only game in town. Instead of gaining exclusive hold on power, the moves now have to be about developing democratic structures and norms that allow for strong political institutions underpinned by respect for the rule of law. Also imperative is building a strong economy that can help to engender more inclusive and empowered communities. More importantly, there must be the realization that political transitions require time and forbearance in the midst of urgent pressures and demands to meet people’s expectations. Without these being in play, achieving the lofty goal of a democratic society that works for the common good becomes a gargantuan task.

The unfolding events in the Arab world compel states and societies that have gone through or are still undergoing political transition to appreciate the often complex nature of the process. As history has shown, the road to democratization is paved with high expectations, and numerous challenges. The latest narrative of political transition suggests that Southeast Asia would do well to help the region’s democratizing states strengthen their institutions and their economies – lest they too falter like the many that have travelled the same route.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed.