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The Middle East: Revival of Popular Uprisings for Change

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

A series of recent mass protests in several Arab countries suggest a revival of popular pressure for change. The protests, although focussed on specific social and economic demands, fundamentally have the same objectives as popular revolts four years ago: dignity, social justice and greater freedoms.

Commentary

RECENT PROTESTS in Beirut against government corruption and incompetence highlight a growing revival of non-violent dissent across the Middle East and North Africa. Protesters in Egypt, Iraq as well as Lebanon have been taking to the streets demanding improvement in basic public services such as waste management, accountability and transparency and an end to corruption.

The protests in several Arab countries, although focussed on social and economic demands, fundamentally have the same objectives as popular uprisings four years ago that toppled four autocratic regimes: dignity, social justice, and greater freedom. The series of mass demonstrations have challenged the notion that brutal crackdowns and military interventions have quelled popular willingness on the part of citizens to stand up for their rights in the MENA region.

Renewed uprisings

For many observers, the civil wars in Libya and Syria, Saudi military intervention in Bahrain and Yemen, the Gulf-backed military coup in Egypt, and the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, have sounded the death knell for a democratic transition in the Middle East and North Africa. They argue that the struggle against jihadist extremism and the brutal crackdowns by counterrevolutionary forces had buried any likelihood of renewed civic and political protests.

However, as the Lebanese protests show, there is a renewed upheaval of popular protests against the brutal suppression of dissent and systemic corruption, and a total lack of transparency and accountability, across the Arab world.

The Lebanese protests go even further: they show that the autocratic rulers have manufactured the sectarian divides between Sunni and Shiite Muslims in their countries, often at the expense of non-

Muslim minorities, to ensure the survival of their regimes. Members of the 18 sects that make up the Lebanese mosaic suffer equally from the pungent smell of uncollected garbage and associated health hazards. Alleged efforts by Shiite militants, the country's foremost political force, to instigate violence to undermine the cross-sectarian nature of the protests, have so far failed.

Anger trumps sectarianism

Similarly in Iraq, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, Sunni and Shiite, have taken to the streets of Baghdad and southern cities like Basra every Friday to protest corruption and demand an improvement in basic public services. The Iraqi protests were fuelled by the killing of a young protester Muntather Al Hafi, by security forces in Basra last July. Rejecting claims by politicians that these were due to religious divisions, the protesters chanted "Sectarianism is dead" and "Stop stealing from us in the name of religion".

The country has lost a significant swathe of territory to Islamic State which represents the most brutal expression of sectarian hatred, after 10 years of shaping of the country by sectarian policies which have seen its minorities brutalised and forced to leave by the thousands.

Syria and Libya have been engulfed by civil wars between rival militias, in Syria between Alawites and Sunnis, in Libya between different tribal militias of Sunnis, which have given rise to Al Qaeda offshoots of different shades, Jabhat Al Nusra and Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Unlike Lebanon and Iraq, Egypt has undergone two rounds of popular uprisings, in 2011 and 2013, before the military takeover by General Abdel Fattah Al Sisi.

Even the police are fed up

With a largely homogeneous society and a Coptic minority that has largely been supportive of the repressive regime of the general-turned-president political protests have been generally suppressed. Nonetheless, militant soccer fans and students have staged 800 anti-government protests between October of last year and June of this year, according to Democracy Index.

Even more startling is that the fans' and students' nemesis, the feared and despised police force, has joined the fray. Security forces were called upon to squash protests by low-ranking police officers in several Egyptian governorates, including Cairo, in support of demands for better employment benefits and bonus payments.

The Interior Ministry accused the policemen, the bottom of the heap of the 1.7 million strong Egyptian security forces, of being supporters of the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, who's democratically elected president was removed from office by Al Sisi; they were charged with endangering Egyptian security at a time that the country was confronting a jihadist insurgency.

The message is clear

Leaders in Lebanon and Iraq have responded in more conciliatory terms to the mass protests. Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al Abadi promised to root out corruption and streamline his government. Lebanon's cabinet put its paralysis on full display when it met to discuss the crisis. Rather than announcing immediate steps to rid Beirut of its garbage it referred the issue to a ministerial committee.

The renewed protests may not immediately topple regimes like they did in 2011 but they do reflect fundamental change in the Middle East and North Africa with anger and frustration over corruption and incompetent and repressive government bubbling at the surface. They also suggest that the largely short-lived success of the 2011 revolts has not extinguished a desire for change and a willingness to take to the streets to demand it.

The peaceful protests and extremist jihadism are two sides of the same coin: they are expressions of deep-seated discontent among restless populations that no longer are willing to subject themselves to inefficient, corrupt and arbitrary rule. The likes of Islamic State can only be truly defeated if as much effort is invested in addressing the region's political and social governance issues as is put into security crackdowns and military repression.

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