MIDEAST MONITOR: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman

The Arab Order Undermined

LEBANON, ALWAYS A COCKPIT for regional tensions and conflict, was again plunged into crisis, as Hizballah pulled the rug out from under the government over its failure to disavow the special international tribunal, which is expected to indict senior Hizballah operatives for the 2005 assassination of former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri.

In Sudan, after decades of war and misery, a referendum among the non-Arab, non-Muslim southern minority produced a massive turnout in favor of secession. Optimists hoped for a peaceful, Czechoslovakian-type breakup; others feared renewed bloodshed and further secessionist efforts by other parts of Sudan.

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For a moment, however, the eyes of the region were focused elsewhere, on normally placid and unnewsworthy Tunisia. In an extraordinary, and stunningly rapid, turn of events, the self-immolation of a young man in a provincial town sparked a cascade of popular protests that eventually chased into exile the country's powerful autocratic president, Zayn al-Abidine Ben Ali, 23 years after he had removed the country's founding president, Habib Bourguiba, in a palace coup.

Never before in the history of Arab politics had a ruler been toppled from power by popular protests. Commentators, opposition Arab activists and many ordinary folk from around the region celebrated the event and hastened to herald a new era, one in which authoritarian governments could ignore the deep-seated grievances of their publics, especially their youth, only at their peril.

It was thought that the so-called "Jasmine Revolution" might eventually trigger democratic transformation, the way that Lech Walesa's Solidarity movement in Poland triggered the eventual fall of communism in Eastern Europe, particularly if Tunisia's own transition to democracy proves to be meaningful and durable.

There is no little irony in the fact that Tunisia might even be considered as a model to emulate. After all, throughout 55 years of independence, Tunisia has been at the margins of Arab politics, studiously pursuing its own path in both domestic and foreign affairs, seeking mainly to avoid the embrace of radical and potentially threatening states and political movements. A sizable and educated middle class emerged in an economy that has a large industrial sector and very limited oil and gas reserves, resulting in the highest level of per capita income among non-oil producing Arab states.

At the same time, there were considerable shortcomings. During his first years in power, Ben Ali had briefly experimented with political pluralism, but he brutally repressed the Islamist current when it showed signs of becoming a significant force. Ben Ali's ruling formula – political stability and economic growth in return for unchallenged authority and the complete emasculation of the political system and civil society – worked for two decades.

But against all advice, the regime failed to take advantage of its success and widen the political and social space, even incrementally, in order to reinforce its legitimacy. Instead, it became even more repressive and heavy-handed. The apparently exponential increase in the level of corruption, centering on the Tarabelsi family (that of Ben Ali's current wife), deepened the anger and alienation that young Tunisians, especially, felt towards the authorities. The worldwide price rises in basic commodities in 2010 added a new layer of pressure.

Tunisia has always possessed a fair amount of the elements deemed necessary for establishing and maintaining a political system that at least approaches a Western-style democracy: social cohesion, an educated multilingual middle class, a legacy of authentic non-governmental civic and professional organizations, such as trade unions and its bar association, a strong tradition of secularism and concern with women's rights, and an absence of grievances and complexes regarding the colonial past one finds in neighboring Algeria. But at the same time, Tunisian political life has from the outset been dominated by the president, leaving all other political parties and forces emasculated.

Given the strong challenge mounted by the Islamist current two decades ago, the Tunisian authorities will surely be wary of giving the Islamists much space to operate. At the same time, excluding an Islamic current entirely from politics carries its own risks: the possible creation of a permanent and potentially attractive opposition pole untainted by the need for compromise or responsibility; pushing Islamic militants into the radical, jihadi underground; and making it more difficult to achieve a consensus on the rules of the political game.

The Tunisian events sparked a series of similar protests, which spread across neighboring Algeria, with Jordan experiencing discontent over price hikes as well. Egypt, Algeria and Mauritania have all witnessed copycat self-immolation attempts, and opposition political forces planned their next moves with the Tunisian example in mind.

For now, however, Tunisia seems to be more of an exception than an exemplar. Ruling elites in the Maghreb, Egypt and the Arab East were extremely uncomfortable with the sight of popular protests toppling a fellow member of the club of autocrats. They will surely study the Tunisian experience closely, so as to not fall into the same trap, employing a variety of carrot and stick measures.

To that end, Kuwait has already begun doling out cash grants for food purchases to all of its citizens. Hosni Mubarak's eventual successor in Egypt may seek to reinvigorate the country's political system, to avoid keeping too tight a lid on the social and political pressure cooker.

Meanwhile, Tunisia's own elites will be busy managing the competing and complex pressures of maintaining stability, cohesion and their own particular positions, while seeking renewed sources for regime legitimacy through increased political pluralism, the rule of law, and policies to ameliorate socioeconomic grievances.

As with the Jasmine Revolution, this too, will be watched with interest around the region. ●

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