

After the Spring

Written by Sami Ramadani

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SAMI RAMADANI, JUL 18 2011

The massive upheavals we have seen in many Arab states are the product of circumstances unique to each of them. They are shaped by the nature of the antagonistic social and political forces engaged in these momentous conflicts. The outcomes of these uprisings will inevitably vary due to the specificities of, and prevailing conditions in each country. This can be clearly seen in the diverging outcomes in Tunisia to Egypt, to Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, Syria and Iraq.

However, it is also abundantly clear that the upheavals have broadly similar internal and external causes, and the cultural bonds and historical links between the peoples of these countries have vividly reasserted themselves despite the century-old colonialist-imposed borders and divisions. The mass feelings of solidarity and common purpose are palpable indeed. The power of those rhythmic revolutionary chants invented by the Tunisian masses – ‘The people want to overthrow the regime’ and ‘Depart! Depart!’ – was immense. They were made even more powerful when picked up by the masses in Cairo. Today, they have become the great anthem of the uprisings across the Arab world.

As to the ramifications and consequences of these upheavals, the regional and international shockwaves are still being keenly felt, but even some of the short-term outcomes are still in the balance. Longer term, the picture is even more complex and unpredictable. The balance of forces is constantly shifting between the revolutionary forces that have flexed their muscles on the streets, workplaces and campuses, and the forces of domestic and international counter-revolution. Having recovered from the initial concussions, these have predictably embarked on the path of bloody confrontation.

The Libyan exception

Though the uprisings have enjoyed worldwide moral support, they have been materially self-reliant – with the exception of Libya. There the democratic uprising was speedily transformed, with its political leadership falling into the grip of former regime stalwarts and its military ‘wing’, according to the Wall Street Journal, being trained by former ‘al-Qaida’ elements who were kidnapped by the US and ‘rehabilitated’ in the Guantanamo Bay torture cells.

These self-appointed leaders succeeded in focusing attention on seeking western military intervention at an early stage of the popular uprising. They encouraged the people on the streets of Benghazi to prematurely resort to arms even before the Gaddafi dictatorship unleashed its savagery on the people. In addition to the brutality of the regime, this early rush to arms was one of the main factors preventing the uprising from gathering momentum across Libya, particularly in the capital Tripoli where more than a quarter of the population lives.

In a throwback to the months before the 2003 occupation of Iraq, when some of the opposition figures elided opposition to Saddam’s dictatorial regime with backing for US-led intervention in Iraq, Libyan opposition figures based in Paris and London denounced Gaddafi’s regime and called for western intervention. Al-Jazeera satellite TV played the leading role in publicising these figures and promoting their messages hour by hour at an early stage of the uprising in Benghazi. And although the channel gave space to the protesters opposed to any external intervention, it constantly promoted former regime personnel and Nato-backed figures based in Paris and London who were calling for western intervention almost from day one of the uprising in Benghazi.

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The studio expert guests who backed intervention were also given prominence. These included a well-known former Egyptian general, turned media military expert, who was interviewed numerous times giving military advice and later calling for intervention long before any Libyans within Libya called for it. This coverage reminded me strongly of the BBC's coverage of Iraq before the invasion.

In contrast, the organisations and popular figures that came to the fore in Tunisia and Egypt stressed the peaceful nature of the protests and constantly appealed for restraint in the face of violent repression. People forget that in Egypt about 500 peaceful protesters were killed and many thousands injured by Mubarak's security forces, but the protest organisers insisted on discipline and mobilising millions of people across Egypt in a magnificent show of people's power and defiance. Having peaceful, disciplined millions of people on the streets, who only used limited violence in self-defence, played an important role in thwarting the Tunisian and Egyptian rulers from getting the army generals to order the soldiers to open fire on the people. The crowds engulfed the conscript soldiers and fraternised with them, and the soldiers responded by letting, or even encouraging, the protesters to take rides on their tanks!

Biding their time

Nonetheless, it has become crystal clear that the generals in both Tunisia and Egypt are biding their time. And while willing to ditch the ex-presidents Bin Ali and Mubarak, they are making other concessions only after being challenged by the people on the streets and in the workplaces. In both countries revolutionary enthusiasm remains high, despite repressive measures. Significantly, most of the working class and students have been active in both upheavals, with large-scale strikes making economic and political demands.

In Tunisia, the trade union leaders were forced to resign because of their cooperation with Bin Ali's regime. In Egypt, the workers have dismantled the entire edifice of the official 'trade union' organisations, which acted as the direct arm of the regime. However, there is as yet no powerful nationwide umbrella structure for the emerging free trade union movement. The current attempts are brave and have potential but remain relatively weak. Furthermore, there are no large working class or left parties or other organisations that can shape the course of events. To that extent, political parties on the left in Tunisia have played a more visible and prominent role in mobilising the masses to challenge the regime, while anti-sectarian religious figures came to prominence in Tahrir Square. But the potential for the democratic left in both countries remains good.

The Muslim Brotherhood is still the largest organisation in Egypt, but is being challenged by both the much more sectarian religious movement, the Salafis, on the right, and by a myriad of political organisations on the left and other secular groups. Despite the fact that the younger members of the Brotherhood were part of the coalition of groups that sparked the initial wave of protest marches, most of the leadership was ready to reach a deal with Mubarak's regime, and did so publicly after Mubarak appointed his place-man Omar Sulaiman as Vice President. This caused a major revolt in the Brotherhood's ranks and it had to make a hasty retreat.

The Brotherhood has always acted as an expression of some of the poorest people's demands and often confronted the central and local authorities. However, this role was coupled, since the early 1970s and Sadat's era, with that of acting as the lid on the people's mounting anger against the fabulously rich, US-pampered ruling circles, who further stoked the anger by forming a de facto alliance with Israel against the Palestinian people and supporting the US-led occupation of Iraq.

Despite its relative organisational strength, the Brotherhood does not have majority support among the millions of active participants in the uprising. On the contrary, and despite being culturally religious in their sentiments, most of the people have expressed the sort of demands that have been traditionally championed by the Egyptian secular left.

Although regional and international issues were not at the cutting edge of the people's demands, the latest (13 May 2011) one-million strong rally in Tahrir Square was dedicated to the Palestinian people's struggle. 'Down with the US, down with Israel' and sacking the remaining Mubarak regime figures were the main slogans of the rally. It ended with a call for a march to the Rafah crossing into Gaza to commemorate the Nakba (Catastrophe) Day – the founding of Israel on 15 May 1948.

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The mood at the rally, the largest for several weeks, was angry following clashes between Muslims and Christians in the Cairo suburb of Imbaba the week before. All speakers at the rally were cheered to the rafters after accusing the Mubarak regime thugs, the US and Israel of being behind the clashes, which were described as a 'an attempt to sow discord between Muslims and Christians in order to crush the revolution'. Mubarak's interior minister is being investigated for 'planning' the bombing of the Al-Qiddisine church in Alexandria on new year's eve. The public prosecutor is also investigating several attacks on churches last year in which the security forces were suspected of involvement.

A common feature of some of these incidents is the withdrawal of police guarding the churches hours before the attacks. There are about 10 million Christians out of Egypt's 82 million population, and the potential for the counter-revolution and the Salafis to instigate damaging divisions in this way is big.

Meanwhile, and with al-Jazeera commanding the TV screens, Nato is gradually destroying Libya's infrastructure, much as the US did in Iraq during the years of sanctions and subsequent occupation – all in the name of human rights and supporting democratic movements. The decision to intervene in Libya is a reflection of the fact that the regime was regarded as an unreliable friend of the US and the giant oil corporations, including BP. This, despite the fact that since 2004 Gaddafi had been rehabilitated by Bush and Blair following the renewal of the oil contracts with Exxon, BP and other oil corporations.

If the intervention fulfils the aims of its enforcers, it will lead to them securing Libya fully for the Nato powers and let them use the country as a base against the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Alas, the heroic struggle of the Libyan people for a genuine democratic revolution would have been thwarted by the combined forces of Nato and Gaddafi's regime.

Al-Jazeera and the counter-revolution

Though al-Jazeera has now become the most influential political tool of counter-revolution in the Arab world, its role in Libya and the impact of the sectarian nature of its coverage of the Bahrain uprising would have been much less lethal had it not been for the massive prestige and authority it had gained at the height of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. Tens of millions of people across the Middle East and North Africa turned to the main al-Jazeera channel and to its direct feed channel, al-Jazeera Mubashir, transmitting live from the streets of Tunisia and Egypt, with its intrepid reporters in the thick of it all.

This prestige and authority has given this powerful channel a unique position to influence events and perceptions, particularly in relation to Libya, Bahrain, Syria, Yemen and Iraq. If it is not on al-Jazeera, it is not happening. If al-Jazeera actively backs military intervention then it must be necessary. And if al-Jazeera dismisses a heroic and beleaguered people's uprising in Bahrain as being marginal and sectarian then it is right to ignore the Saudi tanks that were sent to crush it, and to ignore the presence of the US fifth fleet protecting the Bahraini ruling elites and the other ruling families across the Gulf.

Al-Jazeera's sectarian coverage of the Bahraini people's uprising, falsely depicting it as a mere Shia protest stirred up by Iran, has been as damaging in its impact as its coverage of Libya. Although al-Jazeera has always had a sectarian undertone at an editorial level, a marked shift in direction came when the Qatari ruling family, the main financial backers of the Qatar-based channel, buried their long-standing conflict with the Saudi ruling family in the wake of the revolutionary tidal wave reaching Bahrain and threatening the ruling family next door.

The channel's silence towards the violent suppression of the protesters in Bahrain, headquarters of the US fifth fleet, was backed up by live interviews with Sheikh Qaradhawi, a very influential Egyptian cleric and a guest of the Qatari ruling family. He dropped the pretence of backing the people's demands for freedom, attacked the Bahrain uprising and implicitly backed its brutal suppression. Earlier, he took everyone by surprise when he issued a fatwa to kill Gaddafi.

The Libyan scenario has now become the counter-revolution's blueprint for Syria, where the regime is engaged in the

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violent suppression of the democratic protest movement, using the many tentacles of the state, including the regular army. What distinguishes Syria from the rest of the Arab regimes, however, is that it has refused to come under the US-led umbrella, backed the resistance organisations of Hamas in Palestine and Hizbullah in Lebanon, and forged an alliance with Iran.

This certainly makes it a prime target for US-led meddling and possible intervention. For it is not the Syrian regime's repressive nature that worries Washington and Tel Aviv but its regional policies and refusal to concede full sovereignty over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. Even today, and as in the past, the US would be prepared to accommodate the Syrian regime if it abandoned its regional stance.

White House headaches

Who to back and who to abandon among the hordes of pro-US dictators has certainly given the White House severe headaches. One such headache has been Yemen's dictator, a recent convert to the Washington-led 'war on terror', president Ali Abdullah Saleh. The criteria used by the US mean that if the people threaten the entire edifices of the repressive states, and if the dictators fail to stem the tide of revolution, then the US would be prepared to ditch the dictators in order to preserve the repressive structures and social divides in the hope of absorbing and dissipating the people's anger. The motto is to take cover and fight another day.

However, fighting another day is a very precarious option in Yemen, where the uprising attracted the participation of millions of men and women. The many regional, sectarian and tribal divisions that the regime had sought to exacerbate have not prevented the two-month old uprising from sustaining a heroic momentum, despite the violence deployed by the security forces. One complicating factor for the US is that the Saudi ruling family is keen on preserving more of the regime than is possible in the face of a great mass revolt. The US-backed Saudi and Gulf regimes' plan for a gentle handover of power to another regime figure has been decisively rejected.

No such 'gentle' transition is remotely possible in another crucial arena of struggle, where the people of occupied Iraq face a powerful death machine. In one sense the protest movement in Iraq hasn't stopped since the 2003 US-led occupation, but it is noticeable that peaceful marches and protests are becoming the norm in the country, with two twin demands forming the cornerstones of the people's protests: 'No to the occupation' and 'No to corruption'. At the same time, cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, whose organisation can still bring a million people onto the streets of Baghdad, has declared that his Mahdi Army will resume military attacks on US forces if they do not withdraw by the end of the year. Bridging the sectarian divide nurtured by the occupation and its Iraqi allies remains the biggest task facing the struggle of the Iraqi people for liberation and democracy.

Four important issues have been underlined by these historic uprisings. The first is that the tidal waves of spontaneous people's power across the Arab world are overwhelmingly democratic and anti-imperialist in nature, despite the setback in Libya. The second is the relative absence of strong democratic left organisations to further the struggle in months to come. The third is that the counter-revolutionary forces ruling the region, led by the Saudi regime, are still strong and capable of bloody retaliation. And the fourth is that the bonds between the corrupt dictatorships and imperialism are as strong and integral as ever.

Monopoly capitalism has relied on the Middle East and North Africa as its milk cow for a century or more. No such high level of exploitation and control, in such a fabulously rich and strategically vital region, could be sustained without backing parasitic and corrupt social classes ruling through an extremely repressive political order, armed to the teeth by the big powers. This is even more true today.

The notion that democracy in the region is also in the interest of the ruling classes in the US and its NATO allies was and continues to be an illusion and a fabrication. It becomes a dangerous fantasy when taken up by some liberal circles and champions of humanitarian intervention, whether in Britain, the US or France. This fantasy could kill a million people and destroy an entire country, as in Iraq, and might yet do the same in Libya, Syria, Lebanon and Iran.

Sami Ramadani is a senior lecturer in Sociology at London Metropolitan University. He is active in the anti-war

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movement and was an exile from Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime. You can view more of his articles on his Guardian profile. This article was originally published in Red Pepper