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Reflections on Violence and Nonviolence in the Arab Uprisings

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By Guy Burton

Following the overthrow of the Tunisian and Egyptian presidents in the last two months, the Arab uprisings appear to have stalled. Across the Middle East, the region's leaders appear to have absorbed the lessons of Tunis and Cairo quickly in order to remain in power. The use of state repression, including security forces to remove demonstrators and the arrest of dissidents has occurred at a growing rate over the past month.

In the wake of Mubarak's fall, attempted 'days of rage' were quashed in Saudi Arabia and Iran. Last week the Bahraini government received support from the Saudi armed forces in quelling the protests. Meanwhile, in Yemen the opposition appears to be heading down the same path as in Libya, where they have taken up arms against an increasingly repressive regime. Indeed, much of the media focus is on events in Libya, where the future of the 'Arab spring' may either be sustained through an opposition victory or broken by a successful counter-revolution by Muammar Gaddafi.

Causes of regime weakness

It is not apparent that opposition success or failure in Libya will hasten or end the Arab uprisings; the protests across the region operate in different contexts and have at their roots a range of different causes. Instead what Libya and the other Arab cases present is at present a counterintuitive hope for the future.

Although force is generally perceived as a means of strength, in this instance it may be reflecting a growing weakness in the region's regimes. On the one hand, in those countries where the opposition has resorted to arms, as in Libya and increasingly Yemen, this has been made possible by internal splits within the regime. More specifically, the opposition has exploited links with dissident elements within the armed forces to gain access to necessary military equipment in order to undermine the regime.

On the other hand, the use of nonviolence by opposition groups has also made a difference. The (unfinished) revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt are the most relevant examples in this respect. Despite the security apparatus being initially united behind the regime, the use of nonviolent people power was sufficient to prompt a crack and lead to the eventual fall down of both Zine Abidine Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak in Tunisia and Egypt respectively.

Of the two, the experience of Egypt, the Arab world's most populous country, is especially instructive in this regard. Although Mubarak was forced down by a combination of political and economic pressure through mass demonstrations and labour strikes over several weeks, both had much earlier origins. Economically, labour unrest and demands for better wages and working conditions may have been scattered but had been ongoing within the country for several years. Politically, criticism of the regime had also surfaced over time encouraging people across the layers of society to coalesce around mutual frustrations and clandestinely organise via social media networks. In the months before the 25th January movement crystallised, various individuals and groups adopted flash mob tactics to organise 'flying' demonstrations which dispersed before security forces could even get involved.

The impact of these specific economic demands and political manifestations was two-fold. First, it challenged the regime's repressive capacity. While labour unrest was contained, it did not eliminate the original resentment. Second, the fact that economic and political protest was able to happen – even on a small scale – arguably reduced people's fear of the regime and made it possible for other, larger demonstrations to take place.

Of the two challenges, the internal one within people's minds is perhaps the most important. Once sufficient numbers of people recognise the 'weakness' of the state's capacity to prevent opposition, then the prospect for revolution is already half realised. In such instances, although the state may resort to violence and repression, it does so at higher risk. While it may turn the people back, it cannot turn the clock back. Once activated, the public's rejection of the regime cannot be won over, even if accompanied by promises of more public spending or political and economic reforms.



Libyans protesting against Muammar Gaddafi's rule. Photo: Reuters

This process – from small scale protests backed by limited, specific demands through to the larger demonstrations and the rejection of the entire order – may yet be underway in one of the Arab world's most controlled societies. The last week has seen protests emerge in Syria, from the small town of Daraa near the border with Jordan to other cities throughout the country.

The demands have varied, from rejection of the emergency law to the arrest of schoolchildren for anti-government graffiti. The response by Bashar Al Assad's government has been violent including the use of tear gas and live ammunition to disperse demonstrators, resulting in a number of deaths. The significance of these actions therefore goes far beyond the present number and size of the demonstrations. Even if the regime is able to end the protests and maintain control over society, it may be the case that a Rubicon has been crossed by many Syrians.

Implications for foreign support

The implications of what is happening in Syria and the wider Middle East region are important for external observers and policymakers, including those sitting in Washington and Brussels. First, they should not assume that the regimes' removal of the physical traces of protest means that the unrest is over. In the absence of any significant political or economic reforms, the causes of these social tensions will remain. Furthermore, these grievances will continue to be present in a population whose perceptions have changed and who can see both an end to the regime and an alternative future.

Second, the support – or at least tacit acquiescence – of the international community for these regimes' actions may have adverse consequences later on. By not standing up in support of the protestors and their demands the international community's credibility may be diminished in the eyes of the opposition, especially should they take power after these regimes are swept aside. This may well be the case in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Bahrain where the US and the Europeans have been noticeably silent with regard to the state repression so far undertaken.

Third, the international community should reflect on how it should best engage with the Arab protests. In contrast to its actions in the Arabian Peninsula, several Western countries have opted for a military approach in Libya, by imposing a no-fly zone and carrying out air strikes.

This approach highlights the West's continuing commitment to the flawed assumption that air power alone is sufficient to achieve a more level playing field between Gaddafi and the opposition – and so disregarding past evidence from Kosovo, Vietnam and the Second World War that air strikes do not break the morale of the targeted regime.

In sum, the West's use of military force in Libya and its silence elsewhere demonstrates a lack of imagination over the range of other, nonviolent forms of assistance that it could employ. Instead of opting for force, it could make extensive use of targeted aid to assist development objectives within Arab societies (the source of many social grievances) alongside external pressure on regimes to adopt a more responsive stance in relation to its society and their demands. This would involve the West as an honest broker in the current uprisings making it clear to the regimes that their expiry date has drawn closer as well as facilitating a peaceful transfer of power while in the meantime averting any further violence from escalating.

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*Protesters against Bashar Al Assad's regime in Syria.
Photo: AP*



A tank belonging to forces loyal to Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi explodes after an air strike by coalition forces, along a road between Benghazi and Ajdabiyah, March 20, 2011. Photo: Reuters, Goran Tomasevic