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Has the Arab Spring Stalled?

Autocrats Gain Ground in Middle East

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Burning churches in Cairo, dead and wounded in Syria, Libya and Yemen, and a deathly silence in Bahrain. The Arab protest movement has come to a standstill, and the kings, emirs and sultans are rallying to launch a counterrevolution.

According to the "Fundamental Law of Revolution," regimes fall when those at the bottom are fed up with the status quo and those at the top are no longer capable of remaining in power.

That was the experience of Vladimir Ilyich Lenin.

But difficulties arise when there is one thing those at the top are still quite capable of doing, namely deploying tanks to deal with their opponents -- as is the case in Syria and Libya.

Last week, the Syrian regime sent heavy artillery into the rebel city of Dara'a, while its forces attacked protesting students with clubs in the previously calm city of Aleppo, in Baniyas on the Mediterranean coast and in the northwestern Syrian town of Homs. According to Amnesty International, by last Tuesday 580 Syrians had died in the unrest. The United Nations human rights office puts the number of deaths at up to 850.

In Libya, Colonel Moammar Gadhafi is attacking the rebels with snipers and mortars. Supported by NATO air strikes, the rebels did manage to capture the airport in the coastal city of Misurata. Nevertheless, it didn't feel like the revolutionary leader's days were numbered, despite rumors that surfaced on Friday evening that Gadhafi had been wounded in a bombing attack and had already left the capital city Tripoli. In a subsequent radio address, Gadhafi informed the "cowardly crusaders" that he was living in a place "where they cannot find and kill me."

Revolutions Can Fail

It becomes even more difficult when many ordinary citizens turn against the revolution, as has been the case in Tunisia and Egypt, as well as Yemen and Oman. As it turns out, it isn't just the elites most closely associated with autocratic leaders who fear for their benefits, privileges and positions. These fears are also shared by the thousands upon thousands involved in the bloated apparatus of political parties and governments. And the lower their position and income, the more desperately they sometimes cling to the traditional system, particularly because ordinary public servants were not able to line their pockets and open Swiss bank accounts.

The Arab revolution has come to a standstill, and all signs point to a restoration of the status quo. The new Arab world has reached a point at which many revolutionaries are worn out and those who are still in power refuse to give up control. Influenced by the images of celebration from Tunis, Benghazi and Cairo, many apparently forgot that revolutions could also fail.

What succeeded in Central and Eastern Europe 20 years ago is not necessarily destined to repeat itself in the Middle East. The Tunisians and Egyptians have undoubtedly made history, but the regimes in the countries to which their revolutionary virus has spread now have no intention of allowing their governments to implode.

The first act in the revolutionary drama in the Arab world ended when Libyan Colonel Gadhafi refused to go into exile, like Tunisia's former President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, or to retire, like Egypt's Hosni

Mubarak, instead ordering his thugs to shoot at his own people. Gadhafi's stubbornness has emboldened many autocrats. If the Libyan dictator had followed in former Tunisian President Ben Ali's footsteps and stepped down, there would be no tanks in the streets or people being herded into football stadiums in Syria.

Three Different Approaches

The second act of the so-called "Arab Spring" smells more of gunpowder smoke and burned-out churches than of jasmine. In the light of early summer, some things look different than they did only eight weeks ago. In many cases, the status quo seems so entrenched that a Facebook revolution alone is no longer capable of suddenly transforming it into images of people dancing in the streets.

Despots frequently rely on a broad cross-section of businesspeople, party officials, civil servants and military officers who have nothing more to lose than their chains. For decades, rulers like Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, Gadhafi in Libya, the Assad family in Syria and the Khalifa clan in Bahrain have managed to build a network of patronage and play off individual clans and old-boy networks against one another.

In the harsh light of recent weeks, three approaches have emerged with which the *anciens régimes* are addressing the crisis.

The first is the path chosen by China's leadership on Tiananmen Square in 1989 -- brutally overpowering all resistance. The regimes in Libya, Syria and Yemen are currently trying out this approach to see if it works. Bahrain already seems to have employed it successfully.

The second is the method used by the Turkish military after its coups of 1960, 1971 and 1980 -- an uneasy but expandable democracy controlled by the military. This is the scenario that is unfolding in Tunisia and Egypt.

And then there is a third, narrow path of reforms directed from above. The monarchs in Jordan, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Morocco, as well as Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, know that the younger generation is demanding more participation and will not be satisfied in the long run with being placated in an autocratic manner. These rulers seem to be trying to hold onto power by making small concessions.

The Regimes' Message: Choose Us or Chaos

'Choose Us, or Chaos'

The Syrian government's crackdown on protesters most closely resembles the Chinese approach. Bouthaina Shaaban, the confidante and spokeswoman for President Bashar Assad, allowed a single Western journalist into the country last week, the Middle East correspondent for the *New York Times*. In a [conversation with the reporter](#), Shaaban said the rebellion was the work of a "combination of fundamentalists, extremists, smugglers, people who are ex-convicts and are being used to make trouble." The end of the protests was near, she added, insisting that the regime had already survived the worst of the unrest, and that it was time to start a "national dialogue."

Meanwhile, the government struck back against the protesters even more forcefully than before. Several cities in southern Syria are completely shut off from the outside world. According to the trickle of information coming from Dara'a, the electricity and water supply have been cut off, hardly any food is reaching the city and the shooting continues. Syrian human rights activists reported 13 dead last Wednesday alone and noted that one of those killed was an eight-year-old boy.

Syria's security apparatus has also disabled mobile telephone service, reportedly using software and hardware provided to the regime by Iran. Tehran denies this, and yet it remains one of the few allies still supporting the secular Baath Party regime in Damascus.

The regime justifies its actions with the same arguments it has always used to defend its police state.

"If there is no stability here, there will never be stability in Israel," said Assad's cousin, businessman Rami Makhlouf. The message: Choose us or chaos.

Syria has also been accused of inciting violence on May 16 along the Israeli border, where Israeli soldiers shot and killed some 15 Palestinians taking part in an annual march there to mark the *nabka*, or "catastrophe" of their displacement after Israel's founding in 1948. Washington alleged that the Syrian government encouraged unprecedented participation, with people coming from Lebanon, Gaza and Syria to overwhelm the Israelis and spark an incident to distract attention from the crackdown on protestors and prove that the delicate stability in the region could only be maintained if Assad stays in power.

Assad would hardly be taking such a brutal approach if he weren't convinced that officials in Washington, Ankara, some European capitals and even Jerusalem were quietly relieved that his country hasn't been divided yet, like post-revolutionary Libya, and hasn't descended into a religious civil war, either, like Iraq did a few years ago. For those practicing realpolitik in his neighborhood and in the West, Assad remains a predictable dictator. By last Friday evening, the British press had not commented on the fact that his wife, who grew up in Great Britain, and their three small children had flown to London.

Honoring the Counterrevolution

Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh seems to be making similar calculations, as he coolly rides out a revolt that has been seething for four months and defies all attempts by his neighbors to convince him to make an honorable exit. He occasionally suggests the possibility of stepping down, and sometimes he makes threats, as he did last Friday, when he said: "We will counter every challenge with our own challenge."

The protesters fear that the man who has run the country for more than 30 years could succeed in stalling them. "With each additional day he remains in office, he weakens the youth revolution," they say. On Wednesday, snipers fired at a group of marching protesters once again, injuring dozens and killing a young man.

In Bahrain, the Sunni royal family has already completely stifled the protests by Shiites and reformers. The leaders of the movement have been arrested, the activists fired from their jobs and the press gagged. In the capital Manama, Pearl Square, the center of the protests, has been paved over and redesigned. It is now being referred to in the media as "Gulf Cooperation Council Square," in honor of the troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates that helped quell the revolt there on March 14. Now even the Arab counterrevolution has its heroic square.

The United States, whose Fifth Fleet is stationed only a few kilometers away, has been silent on the incidents in Bahrain.

The governments in Manama, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi know that Washington is more interested in maintaining stable conditions in the Gulf and Syria than in North Africa. As a result, they have ignored their large ally and pursued their own "Yes, we can" policies without Washington.

Obstacles Ahead

The generals running the show in Tunis and Cairo since their governments were overthrown do not dare looking to the future with such confidence. If their statements are to be believed, they imagine a transition from dictatorial to democratic conditions based on the Turkish model. To achieve this, however, they must depend on support from the West to overcome powerful adversaries.

In Tunisia, the new government must contend with holdovers from the Ben Ali regime who have retained their positions in the Interior Ministry and in business.

In Egypt, it is the many criminals who were released or escaped from prison in the last days of the Mubarak regime, as well as the radical forces of political Islam who are testing the new freedoms. The

threat that continues to emanate from these militants was reflected in the arson attack on the St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church in Cairo's Imbaba neighborhood two weekends ago, in which 12 people died. The sectarian violence flared up there again on May 15, when clashes between the two sides left at least 55 injured.

While these incidents are still no proof of a religious war, like the Turkish model, they do show that the road to pluralism and democracy is full of obstacles.

The situation in Cairo is currently changing "from bad to even worse," warns the Egyptian Nobel laureate and possible presidential candidate Mohamed ElBaradei. "I'm more concerned about the Salafists than the Muslim Brotherhood." It was Salafists, members of a fundamentalist movement that invokes what it calls the original Islam, who assassinated former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat in 1981. They dream of the Middle Ages, demand the reintroduction of a special tax for non-Muslims not assessed since the 7th century, and prayed -- in a mosque next to the Coptic cathedral in Cairo -- for the soul of al-Qaida leader Osama bin Laden after he was killed.

Islamists were also present during the large demonstrations on Tahrir Square at the beginning of the year. At the time, the protestors, who relied heavily on Facebook to spread their message, managed to maintain the secular character of their revolution. But it remains to be seen how secular the Arab Republic of Egypt will be after the parliamentary elections scheduled for September. The Turkish Islamists had decades to prepare for democratic processes. Their Egyptian counterparts have seven months.

Preventative Measures

Preventative Measures

Meanwhile, the Arab nations that have been spared major unrest until now are trying out yet another approach: the path of preventive counterrevolution.

More and more surveillance cameras are now being installed in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, citizens are being asked to report any sign of extremist thought to the police. In both countries, as well as in Oman and Algeria, the government has announced costly housing construction and job creation programs.

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), an increasingly powerful self-help group of six concerned monarchs, has developed into the center of this enlightened counterrevolution in recent weeks.

At its meeting in Riyadh last week, the council approved aid programs for Oman and Bahrain, battered after protests, and accepted the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan's application for membership, as well as proposing membership to the Kingdom of Morocco.

This could have far-reaching consequences and split the Arab world into new camps -- the influential, elite club of Arab monarchies, and the countries in which young democracy movements have already replaced or are still trying to replace corrupt dictatorships.

Power Built on Sand?

Morocco is more than 5,000 kilometers (3,125 miles) away from the shores of the Persian Gulf. By accepting this kingdom as a new member, the GCC is snubbing two much closer nations with central importance: the 24 million Yemenis, who are far more dependent on economic and political support than the Moroccans; and the 85 million Egyptians, of which at least 2 million guest workers are earning their money in the Gulf monarchies today, reducing the burden on the chronically strained Egyptian economy.

The formation of new blocs downgrades the Arab League, which will exacerbate the political confrontation with poor, densely populated countries, which have either shaken off their anciens régimes (like Tunisia and Egypt) or are still trying to get rid of them (Syria, Yemen), but in either case

face an uncertain future.

The House of Saud and the ruling families in Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE, at any rate, are determined to distribute power to the people only in homeopathic doses, if at all.

In Dubai, known for its cosmopolitanism, five human rights activists are in prison for having dared to sign a petition demanding a greater say in political affairs.

This alone is suspect to the sheikhs and emirs. They fear Egyptian conditions and, according to commentator Sultan al-Qasimi of the Emirate of Sharjah, sense a "temporary marriage of convenience" taking shape between Islamists and liberal forces.

The images from the squares in Tunis, Cairo, Manama and Sana'a have the rulers along the Gulf scared stiff. They sense that their power could be built on sand and that not all protesters can be placated with strict surveillance and money.

There is a great deal of nervousness in the Arab world. Another clever comment on revolutionary progressions doesn't come from Lenin but from the French philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. In 1856, he wrote: "The most dangerous moment for a bad government usually comes when it begins to reform itself."

Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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