

Predictions for 2013: Dr Berny Sèbe



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Initiated by liberal, educated, and mostly Westernized elites around the Arab world, the so-called 'Arab Spring' has been seemingly hijacked towards other interests and directions.

The objectives of the Islamists who won democratic elections in Tunisia and Egypt, and those of the increasingly large numbers of jihadists operating against Al-Assad's regime in Syria, have little in common with the bloggers and Facebook users who spread the word about demonstrations on Tahrir Square in early 2011.

With the political vacuum opened in many areas of the Middle East and North Africa region, two models of modernity are vying for support: on the one hand, one which posits a return to rigorous religious roots as the starting point of any Arab and Islamic renaissance, and on the other a more cosmopolitan and liberal view which integrates Western conceptions of human development and progress. A clash between these two incompatible approaches to modernity, briefly allied in an attempt to overturn repressive regimes, is inevitable.

The tremors of this tectonic conflict will certainly be felt throughout the Arab world in 2013. Deeply polarized societies, as well as geo-strategical calculations, will keep levels of uncertainty high at a time when new socio-political models have to be agreed upon, reflecting radically different worldviews. As new constitutions are written and genuine elections are to take place, it is far from certain that the social fabric, damaged by decades of dictatorship, will hold tight.

With the West reluctant to intervene openly in favour of the liberals, whilst the Islamists enjoy the covert support of regional powers in search of greater international recognition, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the dynamics of change in the Middle East could be altered durably and take a turn which only the Cassandras had foreseen when the winds of change started to blow on the Arab world two years ago. 2013 will be the year when we see if the hopes raised in 2011 were just an illusion, or a real new departure.