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The 'Spring of the Arab peoples'?

Posted on Thursday 17th February 2011

Tunisia, Egypt and the domino effect in North Africa and the Middle East

1848 witnessed the 'Spring of the peoples' with almost all of Europe contending with revolutionary movements. Are we set to see 2011 remembered as the 'Spring of the Arab peoples'? After Tunisia's 'Jasmine Revolution', Egypt is on course to achieve radical regime change. Western concepts of democracy and government by the people gain ground every day in the Arab world, in spite of the West's reluctance to honour its own principles – an ideological oddity, but a good example of realpolitik. Events in Tunis and Cairo, followed with intense interest in the Arab world, suddenly open a window of opportunity for people's power in countries where election results could be anticipated even before citizens had cast their votes. The Ben Ali and Mubarak precedents demonstrate clearly in the eyes of Arab public opinion that the USA and the EU can be forced to abandon their local trusted allies, especially when they also happen to be lifelong presidents or dictators.

The populations of Tunisia's neighbours, Algeria and Libya, have watched with sustained interest the events of the last month and a half. This is hardly surprising bearing in mind that Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has been ruling his country since 1999, has been a key player in Algerian political life since independence (in 1962), and that Moammar Kadhafi has been performing since 1969 the self-attributed role of 'Guide of the Revolution' (but this was a revolution of another nature than the ones we are witnessing today). Several cases of self-immolation have been reported in Algeria, and demonstrations in several Algerian cities (both large and small, a worrying sign for the government) were severely repressed in early January. The call for a general strike last Saturday was met by a powerful police presence, ending up with a police-demonstrator ratio of 10:1. Yet, the turbulences may not be over and calls to demonstrate every Saturday may become a common pattern of the next few weeks. The President of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights recently declared, 'We do not want changes in the regime, we want a regime change'.

Demonstrators recently took to the streets of Libyan cities, especially the second largest, Benghazi. Both countries also have to keep an eye on Islamist movements, some of which are frighteningly efficient paramilitary groups who are openly fighting these Western-supported regimes (viz Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb). In Morocco, the King's cousin (admittedly not a staunch supporter of the current regime) has publicly stated that the kingdom was not safe from the ripple effect of the current effervescence in the Arab world. Sporadic unrest has also been reported in Mauritania and Sudan. The former has seen a chaotic transition to democracy in recent years and, in Khartum, the secession of Southern Sudan weakens Omar Al Bashir, who has been in power, as Prime Minister or President, since 1993.

Beyond North Africa, rioters in Yemen have tried to oust Ali Abdallah Saleh, who has been ruling the country for 32 years. In Jordan, street demonstrations recently forced King Abdullah to change his government, but this has not been enough to stop the wave of unrest. Bahrain has seen demonstrators take to the streets to demand a more democratic political life. Iran is simmering again, and memories of the demonstrations of the summer of 2009 are still vivid. The only counter-example comes from Syria. Calls for a general strike for February have not led to major demonstrations, in spite of the fact that presidential duties seem to have followed hereditary lines when Bachar al Assad took over in 2000 from his defunct father Hafez (himself in power for 30 years).

Yet, the widely shared popular discontent with governments that prevails in most Arab countries predicts difficult times for those who are still in power. Some of them, such as Algeria and Libya, can hope to use oil and gas revenue as a safety valve, subsidising basic foodstuffs to avoid 'hunger revolts' that degenerate into political movements. Yet, the enthusiasm sparked throughout the Arab world by powerful images of ordinary citizens wrestling their political freedom out of their formerly oppressive governments should not be underestimated. Mubarak's resignation in Egypt (a country that is reputedly the beacon of the Arab world) is bound to be echoed in ways reminiscent of the enthusiasm that surrounded the Egyptian revolution of 1952 and the fall of King Farouk of Egypt. The major difference lies in that modern means of communication, much more interactive than the radio, will make these waves of hope even more powerful and irresistible. The spring of 2011 may well become for posterity the 'Spring of the Arab peoples'.

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