

International Security Monthly Briefing – 28 February 2011

AFTER EGYPT

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This briefing, written at the end of February as the Gaddafi regime clings on to power in Libya in the face of protests right across the country, seeks to assess the significance of the developments of the past four weeks across the Arab world, and attempts to put this in a wider context.

Introduction

Our January briefing, [Tunisia and Egypt in Context](#), was published in the wake of the remarkable political transition in Tunisia, and as mass public protests in Egypt were ushering in the end of the Mubarak regime. The briefing sought to place those events in context and also to look ahead. It pointed to the relative popularity of the monarchs in Jordan and Morocco as an indication that stability in some states might be maintained if there were sufficient reforms, and it also discussed the prospects for two other key states – Algeria and Libya. It reasoned that:

“Both have potential for rapid change, but they do have internal sources of wealth based on energy resources. Conscious of the Tunisian experience, it is probable that both governments will take urgent steps to stem some of the inflationary pressures, especially in food prices, but if this is in the context of the rigorous control of dissent, then opposition could grow rapidly.” (*January Briefing, p2*)

In its overall assessment of the extraordinary changes experienced across North Africa in January, the briefing suggested one optimistic outcome:

“The coming weeks and months will determine whether the traumatic political changes in Tunisia lead on to a stable and more accountable government, and whether the Tunisian experience is repeated elsewhere. If Tunisia does make a successful transition, then other elite regimes may possibly recognise the need to promote emancipation and democracy, and there might just be peaceful transitions elsewhere. That is the most optimistic assessment.” (*January briefing, p3*)

At the same time, it pointed to the risks of inaction in the longer term:

“What is well-nigh certain is that the combination of the deep socio-economic divisions across the region and the gathering impact of environmental constraints mean that in the absence of human security-orientated political change, there will be severe instability and suffering, even if that is over the next decade rather than the next year.” (*January briefing, p4*)

Notes of Caution

First, it is advisable to sound a note of caution and also to include a reminder of three significant aspects of the recent reaction to events. In terms of caution, the whole of the Middle East/North African region is now in a state of flux, and predictions are particularly risky. The Oxford Research Group analysis of international security trends has long highlighted the probability of “revolts from the margins” as people react against autocracy and central control at a time of deep socio-economic divisions and evolving environmental constraints. It has pointed to a range of examples, including deep-seated revolts in India, scarcely reported unrest in China, and the impact of marginalisation in many other parts of the world. The rapid sequence of events in Tunisia, though, were not predicted and may not have been in any sense predictable, and the sheer pace of change in Egypt came as a surprise to almost every analyst. It follows that any attempt to suggest the likely patterns across the region in the coming months can do little more than point to underlying issues and their longer-term significance.

At the same time, three elements are worth recording. One is that many states and movements across the region have deep concerns over the current democratic trends. These include Saudi Arabia where the King Abdullah and the House of Saud worry over the spread of popular unrest to a kingdom where control is ordinarily very robust. An immediate response has been a \$35 billion programme to combat unemployment. In Iran, too, the Ahmadinejad government has its own fears, particularly of a resurgence of the post-election protests. Israel has been content in recent years to deal with rigid and largely unrepresentative Arab governments and is particularly concerned that public influence in new governments could lead to much stronger support for the Palestinians. Perhaps most surprising of all will be the unease being felt among supporters of the al-Qaida movement, since the removal of hated “near-enemy” regimes such as that of Mubarak is being accomplished not by a radical Islamist upsurge but by a complex civil society phenomenon in which religion is just one factor.

The second element is the attitude of western states, where public declarations of support from political leaderships disguise unease at the prospect of dealing with more democratic governments. The western relationship with regional autocracies is decades old and was demonstrated, not without irony, by the rush of senior western politicians to Abu Dhabi during February to support their arms industries in seeking lucrative arms sales at the International Defence Exhibition (IDEX) 2011. While many of the armaments and training programmes related to “big ticket” items, such as strike aircraft and warships, much of the interest lay in a vast range of equipment and programmes concerned with the control of public disorder. Furthermore, IDEX 2011 followed extensive western representation at the Libyan LIBDEX 2010 arms fair last November, held at the Mitiga military airport near Tripoli, which, the organisers predicted:

“...promises to be yet another exciting and enriching event. It will feature the most updated equipment and technologies for the military and national security.” (www.bvents.com/)

The final element is the impact of the popular protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) in other parts of the world. Talk of an “Arab Spring” may be an effective way of summarising recent developments but it still means that the emphasis of analysis is on the trends within and across that specific region. What is also becoming apparent is that the massive coverage of events, especially on Al-Jazeera and other TV news outlets, is being observed right across the world. In sub-Saharan Africa, the impact is substantial, not least in countries such as Cote d’Ivoire and Zimbabwe, but this extends to other autocracies and also to states where the electoral process is weak, such as Uganda. Beyond Africa, there is an impact through to Central and South Asia and especially China. The longer term effect is difficult to assess, but there is now a much wider sense across much of the world that populations have a power and capacity to induce change that was not fully apparent during the upheavals in Eastern Europe that started at the end of the 1980s.

A Region of Change

Meanwhile, within the MENA region, the recent focus has been on Libya, but the extent of demonstrations across the whole region has been remarkable. In both Morocco and Jordan, public protests have resulted in immediate concessions, not least as the two kings seek to divert anger towards their politicians and away from the monarchic rule. The enduring leadership of President Saleh in Yemen is under threat following repeated demonstrations, but much more surprising has been the unrest in neighbouring Oman with deaths and injuries among protestors. There, demonstrations in the northern industrial city of Salalah and the southern town of Sohar have followed a protest meeting in the capital, Muscat. All the demonstrations call for political reform in a country of substantial wealth where the monarchy, under Sultan Qaboos bin Said, has long been assumed to be stable.

Perhaps even more significant has been the outbreak of numerous public demonstrations in Iraq, where a government is slowly being put together, following nearly a year of political stalemate after the parliamentary elections last March. The demonstrations have affected many parts of Iraq and are aimed primarily at forcing the government to be far more effective in running the country. This stems not from a desire for regime change but from an insistence that the endemic corruption and maladministration that is evident right across the country is increasingly unacceptable to people who see little sign of the post-war recovery that was expected to improve their quality of life.

In Bahrain, large-scale protests drawn mainly from the marginalised Shi'a majority resulted initially in much violence and bloodshed as security forces loyal to the ruling Sunni monarchy of Hamad al-Khalifa sought to regain control. Following many deaths and injuries, the royal family recognised the immediate need for some degree of reconciliation, and there were tentative signs of compromise. Bahrain is a reasonably successful economy, drawing its strength from industries related to oil production, but it has long experienced a degree of tension between the Sunni elite and the Shi'a majority. Across the United Arab Emirates and in eastern Saudi Arabia, there are significant Shi'a minorities, and the impact of the violence in Bahrain was sufficient to cause considerable concern among the ruling elites. As an air of compromise emerged in Bahrain by the end of February, so there was a slight diminution in concern in the neighbouring countries. This, though, was where Oman was so significant in that this was an economically successful, if rigorously controlled state, where dissent had simply not been expected. Of all the developments of the past month, it may well be that the Omani disturbances turn out to be the most significant in the coming months.

Libya

Although, at the time of writing, the Libyan regime of Colonel Gaddafi survives, the depth of opposition to the regime in recent weeks is of enduring relevance. As commented in last month's briefing, Libya has had the economic power to ease the circumstances of the poorest sectors of the community, and insofar as rising food prices and youth unemployment form a context for the protests, it should have been possible for the regime to mitigate these by emergency measures such as food subsidies and public works programmes. The regime may not have been sufficiently competent to realise the need to do this, but two other factors have also come into play.

One has been the deep-seated hatred felt by many Libyans towards the Gaddafi regime and its rigorous control of the economy, its endemic corruption and its rigid control of dissent. This, though, has come to the fore primarily because of the extraordinary events in Tunisia and Egypt, immediate neighbours of Libya. The ability of the Tunisians to terminate a regime in a matter of days, followed by the even more startling developments in Egypt have had an effect even in Libya, where there was a presumption of control by an apparently secure regime.

Tunisia and Egypt

Looking ahead, developments in Tunisia and Egypt in the second half of February, following the fall of the Ben Ali and Mubarak regimes, give some indication of prospects for change in the coming months. In Tunisia, there has been sustained opposition to basic aspects of the interim government, especially the involvement of associates of Ben Ali at a senior level. There were large-scale demonstrations towards the end of the month, culminating in the resignation of the interim Prime Minister, Mohammed Ghannouchi. He has been replaced by one of Tunisia's oldest politicians, Beji Caid Essebsi, whose time in office as Foreign Secretary pre-dates the Ben Ali regime and goes back to the era of President Habib Bourguiba. Caid Essebsi may be an interim prime minister but the change of leadership shows a determination by many people to move on from any involvement of those associated with the old regime in the current political transformation of the country.

In Egypt, the military has taken control, and much will depend on the pace and efficiency of moves towards much more democratic governance. On the last Friday of February, tens of thousands of people gathered in the centre of Cairo to renew the sense of revolution, and this indicated a deep-seated commitment to make further progress following the ending of the Mubarak regime. In both countries, though, much will depend on the success of a transition to democracy, but even if that does ensue, still greater problems lie ahead.

Prospects and Problems

The pace of change in the past month has been remarkable, not just in Tunisia and Egypt, but across the region, and especially in Libya. What comes next may be difficult to assess, but two basic issues must be born in mind.

The first is that in any of the countries of the region where old regimes have been overturned, there will be entrenched elites that will be deeply reluctant to cede power to the majority. This does not mean the narrowest of elites that controlled states, such as those very close to Ben Ali and Mubarak, - it refers more to a much wider group of people, numbering many tens of thousands in Tunisia and many hundreds of thousands in Egypt, who have happily enjoyed the fruits of the defunct regimes and will do their very best to maintain their position. In Egypt, in particular, this will include many senior officers in the armed forces, and in both countries, there is a considerable risk that positions of power will be consolidated under new names, possibly confirming the cynical view that revolutions merely change the accents of the elites.

The second issue is that if the worst excesses of such a false transition are avoided, then there still remain all the problems of socio-economic divisions, unemployment and inflation that have to be solved by a legitimate incoming government. The core problem is that expectations will be high - so high as to be unrealisable. For the new political leaderships in Tunisia, Egypt and possibly elsewhere, the most important tasks will be to carry people with them while beginning the process of economic emancipation. That will be no easy task but will be greatly helped if there is early evidence that the richer minorities are required, at a very early stage, to shoulder a substantial burden of the cost of the economic reconstruction that will be essential.

Conclusion

What is at least positive in all of this is the sense of popular power that has been released so rapidly across the region. Whatever happens in the early part of March in Libya, that release has been an act of transformation that is as significant as it is unexpected. The deep-seated problems of divided societies, extreme poverty and unsustainable economies remain, but there is a prospect of positive change that will not easily go away, whatever the setbacks in the coming weeks. Furthermore, that prospect of change may have its effect well beyond the Middle East and North Africa and might even extend to countries in Western Europe as the full impact of the recent financial crisis begins to have its effect there.

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