

International Security Monthly Briefing – July 2011

AWAKENING AND FAMINE IN THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

Paul Rogers

Introduction

The Arab Awakening stutters on, with progress in some countries and repression in others. Meanwhile, severe food shortages in East Africa, due partly to a sustained drought, lead to some parts of Somalia being designated famine areas, echoing problems back in the 1980s and even the 1970s. Many factors are contributing to the plethora of problems across the Middle East and North and East Africa, but economic and environmental trends continue, with the risk that the present-day issues may eventually be seen as markers for even more serious problems in the coming decades.

The Middle East and North Africa

Just two countries set in motion the Arab Awakening and in only one of them has there been significant further progress. This is Tunisia, the originator of mass public protest right at the start of the year. After the rapid overthrow of the Ben Ali regime, there were frequent forced resignations of successor politicians as thousands of Tunisians took to the streets once more, seeing too many of them as tainted by connections with the old regime. Four months later, some degree of calm has been restored under the temporary leadership of a veteran politician, Beji Caid Sebti. Serious economic problems remain that would have had to be faced by any new government, with youth unemployment exceeding 20% and over 150,000 graduates out of work, but there is a sufficiently wide recognition that political reform is beginning and that, in time, a more just economic settlement may be possible.

In Egypt, though, the reformers are less optimistic, largely because the armed forces have retained almost all their economic power and are functioning as a state within a state. This is a circumstance common in many countries, the most notable example being Pakistan, and in Egypt it coincides with a widespread view that the military leadership is reluctant to speed the political transformation to a more participatory democracy. This suspicion has been confirmed in the minds of many by a two-month delay in the elections originally due for September.

Some thousands of protestors have been arrested in the past six months, with many of them tried and sentenced by military courts. The actions of the current leadership - the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces - have prompted further mass public demonstrations that serve as a reminder that there is a level of resilience in Egyptian civil society that is most certainly outlasting the huge demonstrations of January and February. Much will depend on whether the military leadership recognises the extent of changed attitudes in Egypt. If it does, then prospects for political and economic emancipation are still reasonable but Egypt has certainly not matched the changes in the structures of power that appear to be under way in Tunisia. In any case, even if positive change is forthcoming, Egypt's economic divisions remain even deeper than those of Tunisia.

After some initial demonstrations, Oman remains calm, with the ruling elite speeding up modest reforms, and the Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar and Algeria remain largely insulated from events elsewhere in the region. The House of Saud is hugely concerned at the threats to previously stable autocracies and has responded by a combination of over \$100 billion in increased domestic spending with more intensive security controls at home, combined with support for regional monarchies abroad. The monarchies in Jordan and Morocco are both engaging in reforms, but there is substantial public anger in Jordan at the levels of maladministration and corruption, with frequent demonstrations that remain largely unreported in the West. In Morocco, by contrast, the strong pressure for reform has led to a response from King

Muhammad VI in the form of a new constitution that embraces greater parliamentary influence. Whether this is sufficient will depend in part on developments elsewhere in the region.

In Syria, Yemen and Bahrain, the ruling powers are all endeavouring to maintain control, but only in Bahrain is the repression effective, having been aided by the presence of 1,500 troops and police from Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. Frequent public demonstrations in Syria have been suppressed with persistent brutality yet are undiminished in extent. They have not yet spread in a sustained manner to the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo, but the extent of the demonstrations elsewhere every Friday does indicate that the regime may have either to engage in immediate and far-reaching reforms or else be forced from office. The situation in Yemen is far more complicated, with public expressions of anti-government anger in Sana'a adding to clan opposition in the north, secessionist actions in the south, and radical Islamists gaining support. The disparate Islamist groups may have only loose connections with the al-Qaida movement, but they are seen as a sufficient threat in Washington for the CIA to have expanded its operations, including the more persistent use of armed drones.

In Libya, the NATO operations are clearly aimed at regime termination, whatever the public pronouncements may claim, but the war is now heading towards six months of air operations and there are few signs of the Gaddafi regime capitulating. It is slowly losing territory and may ultimately collapse, but the timescale is uncertain, as is the organisational structure that might replace the regime. Meanwhile, disagreement within NATO is camouflaged by bland statements, but Italy is due to withdraw its aircraft carrier from operations shortly and Norway's flight of F-16 Falcon strike aircraft will cease offensive operations by 1 August.

Across the entire region, therefore, one can point only to modest progress in Tunisia, some potential for change in Egypt and limited reforms in Morocco. This certainly represents a positive change from the region-wide autocracies of the end of 2010, but it is still the case that the Arab Awakening, as and when it makes further progress, will be hindered by the underlying problems of economic stagnation and marginalisation.

The Food Crisis in East Africa

During the course of July, the true scale of the food crisis in East Africa became apparent, with two districts of Somalia being declared famine zones, many thousands of refugees crossing into Kenya to emergency camps and up to 11 million people being under threat of malnutrition across parts of Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya and Uganda. While the situation is made worse by the conflict in Somalia, the more general cause is a persistent drought, but this comes on top of problems of development stretching over decades. Because of the publicity given to the emergency, it is probable that short-term responses will be rapid and reasonably effective, yet it remains the case that food security forecasting is far better than three or four decades ago, not least due to satellite reconnaissance, and the implications have to be that responses to developing emergencies remain hopelessly inadequate. This, in turn, is a reflection of a much greater cause for concern, since the very existence of famine in the early 21st Century is an appalling indication of human insecurity.

The most dangerous period of world food insecurity in the past fifty years was the world food crisis of 1973-4, although there were further major problems in the 1980s and substantial rises in food prices in 2008-9 leading to public protests in many countries. The 1973-4 crisis was an intercontinental problem that affected much of North Africa and South Asia, even stretched to parts of Latin America and put 40 million people at risk. A major focus for that crisis became the World Food Congress in Rome in November 1974, and the publicity surrounding that event did much to ensure an immediate international response that provided much relief. What the congress and other negotiations failed to do was to provide sufficient resources to support sustained improvements in tropical food production and

prevent yet more crises. We, thus, face continuing problems amidst estimates that the levels of malnutrition world-wide are actually substantially higher than in the early 1970s.

To put this in a broader historical context, the world economy has experienced protracted growth since the end of the Second World War. There have been periods of retrenchment, including much of the western world in the 1970s and the East Asian downturn two decades later, but the overall trend has been towards economic growth. Yearly increases in GDP divide broadly into two periods. The first is that of just over 30 years from 1945 to the late 1970s, which was characterised for most of the world by a broad mixed-economy approach with extensive state ownership of production and services. The latter part of this period was also a time when attempts were made through the United Nations to develop a degree of planning of commodity markets linked to improving the terms of trade of poorer countries and thereby aid development. This reached its peak during the commodity crisis of 1974 and the Declaration on the New International Economic Order (NIEO) at UN General Assembly Special Session in April of that year. The NIEO came to nothing, and by the end of the 1970s, a neoliberal economic order was taking shape, most notably in the United States and the UK. This was to lead in many countries to less market and financial regulation and more privatisation of state assets, a process aided by the negotiating power of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in what became known as the “Washington Consensus”.

In the current context, the last 35 years have been marked by two trends. One is that while world economic growth has continued, it has actually averaged lower rates of annual growth than the previous era, and the other is that the growth has differentially benefitted around one fifth of the world’s people. This broadly-based elite stretches across the world, partially diffusing the idea of a narrowly geographical rich world/poor world divide, but it has also meant that the great majority of people are relatively marginalised, mostly in the countries of the South. What is deeply troubling is that the economic “success” is so concentrated that many hundreds of millions of people remain in deep poverty and are unable to afford to eat when drought or other factors limit local food production. This point needs constantly to be emphasised - world food reserves in the form of stored food grains may be fairly low but are easily adequate to meet all the demands from regions currently in food shortage. For quite different reasons, the people most affected simply cannot afford to buy food.

Connections

In this way, the current food crisis in East Africa is yet one more example of the deep inadequacies and endemic faults in the current structure and workings of the world economy, inadequacies that, in the matter of food insecurity, are likely to be greatly magnified by the effects of climate change. Moreover, there is a clear impact that is also reflected in some of the driving forces of the Arab Awakening. While much of the desire for political and social emancipation stems from deep antagonisms to autocratic governance, corruption, maladministration and repression, there is also an underlying resentment at the levels of economic marginalisation, the figures for youth and graduate unemployment in Tunisia cited earlier in this article being examples.

What has to be faced is that there is little international political motivation to effect any fundamental changes in the workings of the world economy, even in the aftermath of an extreme financial crisis in 2008-9, and in the context of current problems in the United States and Western Europe that could escalate rapidly in the coming months. Much of the street protest in the Middle East and North Africa has stemmed indirectly from the anger of the marginalised, and this has now spread to Western Europe. The violent street actions in Greece have attracted much attention, but the sustained, if less reported protests in Spain, may turn out to be much more important. They may even be the start of an awakening in western countries that turns out to be as significant as that in the Arab world.

Paul Rogers is Professor of Peace Studies at the University of Bradford and Global Security Consultant to Oxford Research Group (ORG). His international security monthly briefings are available from the ORG website at www.oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk, where visitors can sign-up to receive them via email each month. These briefings are circulated free of charge for non-profit use, but please consider making a donation to ORG, if you are able to do so.

Copyright © Oxford Research Group 2011.

Some rights reserved. This briefing is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Licence. For more information please visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>.