DÜSSELDORFER INSTITUT FÜR
AUSSEN- UND SICHERHEITSPOLITIK

DIAS

DIAS-Kommentar

Nr. 154 • Juni 2011

Dustin Dehez

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www.dias-online.org

Düsseldorfer Institut für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik e.V.
c/o Juristische Fakultät der Heinrich-Heine-Universität
Universitätsstr. 1 D-40225 Düsseldorf

Herausgeber
Düsseldorfer Institut für Außen- und Sicherheitspolitik e.V.
c/o Juristische Fakultät der Heinrich-Heine-Universität
Universitätsstraße 1 D-40225 Düsseldorf

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What Just Happened?

It seems to be an uncontested assumption that what happened in Egypt and Tunisia and what is still in a way happening in other countries across the Middle East is a revolution. While in a way it truly is a revolution, the label is in a way misleading. The labelling is of tremendous importance for two reasons. First, it will be decisive for the sort of lessons we draw from the current upheaval. It is important, second, because some closer analysis will allow for an explanation of why the uprisings have been successful in some instances and not in others.

Most of the time, it is assumed that the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia were successful because they were the first in line of the current revolutions and Mubarak and Ben Ali were somewhat caught off guard. The regimes in Yemen, Libya and Syria, by contrast, had some time to prepare and understood that the only way to survive in power was a brutal crackdown. That is, again, to some extent correct. But what is missing in this picture is that while the uprisings have prepared the toppling of the regimes in Egypt and Tunisia, the real ouster was in both cases done by the armed forces. In both Tunisia and Egypt the threshold to the successful end of the uprisings was crossed when the armed forces refused to fire on the citizens. The refusal to take orders by the regime of the country, while without any doubt legitimate and the right decision, was technically a coup d'etat. For the success of the revolutions the two things – the uprising and the readiness to mount a coup – had to come together.

The 1952 coup by Nasser in Egypt, Lee Smith for instance argues, changed the system into a military autocracy and Mubarak could or did not alter the underlying rationale of the system thus enacted.[1] He maintains that the regime in Egypt has not changed at all since in fact it has always been a military dictatorship. There is a certain irony in his view that the people protesting on Tahrir Square have basically made the same mistake as Mubarak himself, believing that Egypt had become a Mubarak family-dynasty. In this reading the people simply challenged the wrong authority. A closer

look at what happened underscores his point to a certain extent: On February 10, 2011, the High Council of the Egyptian Armed Forces issued a communiqué stating that the military backed the legitimate demands of the protesters. The step was widely expected to be an indication of Mubarak's imminent departure. But Mubarak refused to resign, before being ousted by the military on the following day. At the same time, of course, this interpretation is not exactly cause for too much optimism when it comes to the chances of real regime change in Egypt.

The implications are twofold, however: First, it clearly underlines that we need to spend more time and effort to study the sort of regimes we are currently assessing. Second, it seems to me that the military's success in mounting coups in Egypt and Tunisia, ironically, is related to their comparative professionalism. The militaries in both states have been run like real armies, whereas the armed forces in Syria and Libya for instances have suffered from authoritarian interference typical for states in the wider region. In the latter cases promotions were made on the basis of political allegiance, the autocrat's patronage and ethnic loyalties. Moreover, the security services in many of these states are fractured, with paramilitary forces, special police units and intelligence services all serving as a counterbalance to the regular army. Although these fragmented security structures undermine the effectiveness of the organisations, they are also the hallmark of coup-proofing strategies.[2] All in all, these strategies seem to have been partly successful in Libya and Syria.

What is Going to Happen in Egypt?

How the revolutionary process is going to spell out in the coming months and years is difficult to ascertain. But I wouldn't necessarily share Lee Smith's pessimism. The Muslim Brotherhood for instance has been among those opposition parties that entered negotiations with Mubarak-appointed vice president Omar Suleiman. Even though the negotiations broke down, some opposition parties rejected such negotiations from the outset, such as Kefaya, the National Association for Change and some

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[1] Michael J. Totten, After the Fall of the Pharao, In: pjamasmedia.com, [http://pajamasmedia.com/michaeltotten/2011/06/13/after-the-fall-of-the-pharoah/].

[2] Morris Janowitz, *Military Institutions and Coercion in the Developing World.* Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1977.

leading dissidents, as Ayman Nour and Mohammed ElBaradei have also been critical from the start.[3] This might have seriously harmed the Muslim Brotherhood even before the electoral process was about to begin. Moreover, it seems to me, that the Western media tends to think that the rules of politics are somehow suspended when it comes to Islamist parties. But to gain power you still need constituencies and the support of many constituencies is simply not yet committed to any particular group or party. And the Islamists are not the only ones trying to court the constituencies currently up for grabs.

The threat from Islamist organisations, moreover, seems rather vague and sometimes overstated. For one thing radical Islamist thought appears to be largely discredited. On the other hand many Islamist organisations that eventually became political parties have moved to a slightly more modernist positions over the past years. Shadi Hamid, quite rightly, described the position of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood as moving toward some sort of separation between church and state.[4] The Muslim Brotherhood is actively trying to court Christian votes right now, which signals the movements ability and perhaps even willingness to abandon its old slogan that 'Islam is the solution,' if only for political purposes. Moreover, Islamist parties have in the past avoided taking sensitive government portfolios when actually participating in government, such as defence or foreign affairs. Whether this trend will hold is difficult to say, but if history is any guide, I would not be outright pessimistic on Egypt's more immediate future.

It is also interesting to note that so far no leader of the Muslim Brotherhood has emerged as a charismatic head who could eventually end up winning a majority in a regular election. For now, the leading contesters are Amr Moussa, former Secretary General of the Arab League, and Mohammed ElBaradei, former head of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The consensus in the international media seems to be that as the former head of the nuclear watchdog IAEA, ElBaradei is sort of a technocrat, good in enforcing rules and regulations. And given that Egypt badly

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3 Dina Shehata, The Fall of the Pharaoh. In: *Foreign Affairs*, 90, 3/2011, pp. 26-32.

4 "In the past few years, instead of calling for an Islamic State, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood began calling for a civil, democratic state with an Islamic reference, suggesting a new-found commitment to the separation of church and state (although not of a religion and politics)." Shadi Hamid, The Rise of the Islamists. How Islamists Change Politics, and Vice Versa. In: *Foreign Affairs*, 90, 3/2011, pp. 40-47.

needs a more effective government and an administration that focuses on job creation he might be the sort of a person the doctor ordered for Egypt now. I am not sure that that is an accurate depiction. For one thing, when he joined the Egyptian protests, the media jumped on the story, but support from the international community for him as a potential interim leader was lukewarm at best. The reason for this rather hesitant approach certainly is to be found in his legacy as the head of the IAEA. Even though he and the IAEA received the Nobel peace prize, the leaders in the West were not exactly pleased with his performance. In his memoirs Tony Blair described former IAEA inspector Hans Blix as someone who assessed his job in Iraq as one in which he would have to decide over peace and war. ElBaradeis attitude war largely the same. But Tony Blair rightly points out that that wasn't quite the job Blix or ElBaradei had. He was simply to assess whether Iraq had lived up to its obligations under various United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions. The decision over war and peace clearly wasn't his. When it comes to ElBaradeis legacy on Irans nuclear programme the picture is not that different. Again ElBaradei perceived his task not strictly as a technocratic one, but rather a political one. His assessments were not simply based on UNSC resolutions and the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) but also on whether he thought there was improvement in Irans behaviour. Only again the latter wasn't his job. He even postponed the referral of Iran to the UNSC on the offchance of improvement in Iran's cooperation catalysing Teheran's rather flexible interpretation of its NPT and UNSC obligations. In sum, he clearly was more wavering politician than technocrat. Ironically the upheaval in Egypt serves as another example of his rather lacklustre performance as a politician. He only appeared on Tahrir Square to participate in the demonstrations once the situation had matured in a way that favoured the protesters.

How Can We Explain What Happened?

Only a couple of years ago the majority of European scholars was convinced that the regimes in the Arab world were largely stable and so deeply entrenched that revolutionary change not only seemed unlikely but virtually impossible. The standard explanation for the assumed regime stability rested on an overstatement of the stabilis-

ing effect of clientelism and state patronage.[5] The patronage system would allow for broadening the appeal of even autocratic regime by co-opting large portions of the elite, basically giving them a stake in regime survival. I would argue, however, that political science suffers from a lack of historical insight. The historical sciences can offer a perhaps better approach to understanding why regimes like the Maghreb dictatorships eventually fail, even tough they appeared to be relatively stable from the outside.[6] Generally speaking, I would contend that every state is constantly at some place between reform and revolution. Changes in the structure of society and economics and changes in the outside environment continually call for adaptation and adjustment. Speed and extent of reforms indicate how well a country is adjusting to these changes. The need for these reforms is becoming even more pressing under globalisation. Historians like Dan Diner have long argued that the ability to productively process outside influences is the real measure for the survivability of a system. In that particular reading, political systems need to be enacting reforms on a continual basis. As a matter of fact, reform is the minimum of change necessary to avert revolutions.

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Remarks prepared for the Conference: *The Maghreb in the Wake of the Arab Spring: Implications for Europe*, held in Prague on June, 15th. Organised by Asociace pro mezinarodni otazky/Association for International Affairs.

5 See for this explanatory model Volker Perthes, Gebt dem Nationalstaat eine Chance! In: *Internationale Politik*, 61, 9/2006, S. 62-67.

6 The ideas outlined here are heavily influenced by the late German historian Reinhart Koselleck.