



Arabs rising By Zafar Hilaly

Dictatorships almost invariably end in tragedy and none more manifestly as the Arab world's "Papa Doc" Muammar Qaddafi. His legion eccentricities – the troupe of voluptuous women body guards; the camels (for milk) which accompanied him everywhere; the green book comprising his asinine utterances and the rented crowds that chanted his non-existent virtues – will soon be a thing of the past.

In Yemen on the face of it a similar story is unfolding. Ali Abdullah Saleh, Yemen's most decorated war hero, who has survived more than a dozen attempts on his life and has ruled for 30 years, seems to be losing his grip. However Saleh, unlike Qaddafi, has his wits about him. He hopes to ride out the 'revolutionary' fervour that has gripped the Arab world; and if he is still hanging on we can take it that the breaking point is not at hand. In short, Saleh is no push over.

However, with the announcement on February 26 that the hitherto friendly Hashid and Baqil tribes, on whom Saleh relied so heavily, had also turned against him his prospects appear dim if not dismal. More worryingly for Saleh the defection of these tribes is a sign that the Saudis too have given up on him because had these clans not received a nod from Riyadh, which bankrolls their development, such defiance would have been inconceivable, his bellowing against the west notwithstanding.

However it is south Yemen – where Marxism once flourished and which at one time went by the name of The People's Democratic Republic of Yemen – that may become irreconcilable. Influential southerners, secular, educated and Marxist, have nothing but contempt for their rustic vagabondish northern compatriots. Thus far they have been kept in check by a large northern armed presence; however, any weakening of Saleh's tight grip will be exploited by them to demand secession leading perhaps to a recrudescence of the civil war that raged in the 90s. But regardless of whether Saleh stays or goes Yemen will remain what it has always been – the dark hole of the Arab world. It has little to offer except the port of Aden, now of diminishing importance and, of course, a new safe haven for al Qaeda.

In Bahrain too, where America's base is strategically located in the Gulf and is Saudi Arabia's farthest satrapy, a rebellion of sorts is brewing. However, it will likely run out of steam. Between the Sunni ruling family and the Saudis, the 70 percent Bahraini Shias who have long faced acute discrimination in government jobs and appointments to key posts will either be inveigled by some cosmetic constitutional reforms, beaten or bribed into quiescence. Their true emancipation must await a resurgent and powerful Iran and the new order in the Middle East.

In Jordan the ruling family is not yet on the run mostly because they and fellow tribals have the guns, while the Palestinians who form the majority of the population bear mostly grievances. The fact that the queen is a Palestinian and the king half English has not helped to deepen the monarchy's hold on the loyalties of the native population. But such is the love the Bedouins still have for the late King Hussein that they will continue to protect his son, although allegations of corruption against the queen, if true, will wash some of it away. Nevertheless, King Abdullah is a shrewd politician and one can be sure he will do whatever it takes to preserve the monarchy even conceding democracy, if push comes to shove.

The Arabs seem congenitally unable to forge a consensus as to what type of government best suits their particular genius. While they gave the world a great religion and many notable mathematicians, scientists, explorers, they had nothing to offer when it came to designing political systems other than various forms of despotism.

That's why what happened in Egypt is important. An independent judiciary, a parliament and parliamentary oversight of politicians and a free press backed by an active civil society is the demand of protesting Egyptians. All these in turn will require a modern multiparty state in which the main political parties are organised around programs and socio-economic orientation rather than overbearing personalities.

All eyes are on the Egyptian military which has taken upon itself the responsibility of ensuring a transition to democracy. The best hope for maintaining its stature as a respected national institution (as well as a pivotal future role if things go wrong) lies in facilitating a modern political process. But since the people have no prior experience to work with, while the military's intentions are not clear at this stage, it is too early to be certain of a stable outcome. Yet the prospect has never looked better following Mubarak's fall.

The Arabs have finally won global respect and admiration and this is a far cry from the impotence and sense of inferiority they suffered for decades. However, they will have to replace what they rebelled against with something

distinctly better. They will also have to show some spine when it comes to Israel. All that they are doing at the moment is 'wink and hold out their iron' because they dare not fight.

What comes out of Egypt in particular will affect, if not determine, what happens in Tunisia, Yemen, Jordan and Bahrain to a greater or lesser degree. As for Libya it's not so much a new system for which it is struggling right now but for its very survival.

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