

REVOLT AND ECONOMIC CRISIS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Pejman Abdolmohammadi*

The global economic crisis and popular uprisings part of the so-called “Arab Spring” have over the last year brought the Middle East to the centre of international attention, both economically and politically.

European Member States, in the face of the ever-growing strength of China and India, and weakened by the global economic crisis, have shown renewed interest in the countries of the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. The creation of an economic alliance amongst Europe, the countries of the Middle East (rich in raw materials and low labour costs), and the United States would in fact be the only effective instrument to counter the economic growth of the Asian powers.

Such a scenario is the backdrop to what could be called a form of “post-modern colonialism” in which western powers seek to regain control of the Middle East and Mediterranean.

This would not be the first time: at the start of the 20th century the main instruments of colonisation were contained in the mandatory and protectorate system created by the Skyes-Pico Agreement of 1916. The Agreement, in fact, had divided the region into distinct areas of influence assigned to European powers, for instance Syria, the Lebanon and Tunisia to France, Iraq, Arab countries of the Persian Gulf, Palestine and the then Trans-Jordan to Great Britain.

At the onset of the 21st century also the international political-economic equilibrium has gradually changed. The emergence of new powers such as China, India and Brazil on one hand, and the re-emergence of Russia on the other, represent serious challenges

* University of Genoa.

– both at the economic-financial and socio-political levels – to the existing Western system. The economic crisis is having a particularly dramatic effect on the EU Member States and the USA, in particular leading to painful reassessment of social and economic systems which seemed only a short time ago stable and efficient. The current phase of transition is marked therefore by structural difficulties for the West concurrent with the emergence of new global and regional powers. In this setting, Middle East countries, along with those of the southern Mediterranean, are able to play a significant role. Bearing in mind that China has managed to penetrate most of Sub-Saharan countries, were the West to lose the contest with the Asian colossus, also in the Middle East and North Africa, the result would be problematic to say the least.

Such a situation explains why, since 2001, Western forces have entered Afghanistan and Iraq in attempt to construct a foothold in the Middle East. The Bush Administration's policy of military intervention, however, proved to be too costly and this induced the West to review its interventionist strategies.

The result is that today Europe's major powers and the US have adopted less invasive tactics. After having supported for decades Middle East dictatorships, they now offer support to opponents of the same regimes via various instruments including military backup with the aim of encouraging a process of transition throughout North Africa and the Middle East; such a transition should lay the foundations in the near future for solid pro-Western support. When it became clear that the despot leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen were no longer prepared to guarantee the West's economic interests, a change of strategy got underway that slowly removed the support these regimes had long enjoyed. In fact, these heads of state and/or government had for years violated their people's human rights without any significant diplomatic pressure from Western leaders. Husni Mubarak, for instance, by guaranteeing a pro-Israel equilibrium in the region, was able to govern in an authoritarian way for more than thirty years. Gaddafi, despite exercising despotic power over his citizens and in particular over those who opposed his regime, was lauded by European governments, such as Italy and France. In Tunisia, Ben Ali's repressive policies at home did not prevent him from enjoying European support for twenty years and the reputation of a moderate on the North African political scene.

The inevitable question is this: why at a certain point did the West suddenly realise that these leaders were in fact dictators that were violating human rights? Before attempting to provide a convincing answer, it is worth underlining the fact that the discontent felt by the population of these countries had existed for decades. Unfortunately, the yoke of dictatorship is not easily broken unless in those exceptional situations where men are able to conquer their fear; that fear which, as Montesquieu noted, tyrants feed on to maintain their powers.

Circumstances were to change favourably for some North African and Middle East populations in 2011 and 2012 when the Western powers began to understand the need to overturn the old dictatorial regimes, no longer seen as being prepared to tow the Western line. Indeed, these dictators had if anything started to develop commercial ties with China, thereby challenging their old Western allies.

A regime change in the area therefore became an interest shared by both the West and the oppressed populations of the countries in question. However, what was to be the moral legitimisation that would most effectively implement such a strategy?

Direct military intervention along the lines adopted in Iraq and Afghanistan would no longer have garnered global consent and, furthermore, events in those countries proved how dangerous and costly such a policy could be. A better approach was to support the opposition movements through the supply of weapons and money, and at the same time receive widespread consensus amongst the international community.

This new strategy has favoured popular uprisings in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt. The long-suffering populations of these countries, ever having had the chance, would have gone out onto the streets in protest against dictators such as Gheddafi and Mubarak years earlier. They were not able to do so simply because their countries' regimes were strong and enjoyed Western backing. Now an extraordinary combination of events has taken place where for a very short period of time the interests of local populations coincided with those of the West.

The way these changes have taken place differs nonetheless from country to country: in Libya, the National Transitional Council was

the conduit, in Egypt, the army played a key role in forcing change, whilst in Syria an army detached from the regime is being envisaged as a way of bringing down Assad.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise that the West will inevitably in forthcoming decades be unable to keep up with China unless it puts into place a broad alliance with the southern Mediterranean and the Middle East. This fact alone explains why the diplomatic chessboard of the Middle East returned to prominence in 2011 and will in all likelihood remain a key actor in the immediate future. We are at the onset of a new cold war between, on one side the United States and major European countries and, on the other an eastern block led by China.