

NORTH AFRICA: A REGION OF CONTRASTS

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1.

The outbreak of protests that shook North Africa politically and institutionally and altered the equilibrium across the entire Middle East has triggered long-lasting structural changes that many observers had failed to recognise in their hurried and at times over optimistic definition of events as the “Arab Spring”.

If there is little doubt that the causes of these protests were substantially common to all the countries involved – autocracy, widespread corruption, acute economic and social crises –, there is also little doubt that the aftermath depends on country-specific characteristics.

In the current situation, three years after the fuse was lit in the small Tunisian town of Sidi Buzaid marking the onset of unrest, the region’s countries, despite their differences, have some things in common.

Firstly, the main players in the early days of the protest, those who invoked work and dignity, freedom and democracy, have paid a high price for their strategic failings. Those who benefited most from the overthrow of the upper echelons of the autocratic regimes that got underway in 2011 are in fact those who are the politically best equipped, with strong ties with the social fabric of their communities. Indeed, perhaps too many have benefited.

The political and social forces linked to the autocratic regimes in place prior to the revolt have been able not only to reorganise but regain significant if not determinative roles. These forces have in fact been favoured by a worsening of the socio-economic conditions that were at the heart of the uprisings and by the fact that the collapse of the autocrats has not coincided with the eradication of the cultural

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and social linkages that the political and institutional systems based their power on.

The winner of the revolt can be seen to be the process that started it in the first place and which is still anything but finished. This process has merely reached a particular stage in its evolution whose most evident feature is characterised by the conflictual search for a national identity and governance structure. Such a search precariously hangs in the balance conditioned by Islam and a political-systemic tradition that represents at the same time equilibrium and instability. Equilibrium, in that Islam has re-emerged stronger than before as a unifying influence; instability, as attempts to obtain a rediscovered identity and political protagonism have led to a polarisation between conservative, orthodox extremists on one hand and nationalist, pro-westerners (perhaps too simplistically referred to as secular society) on the other.

Additional factors in this contest include relations between the North African countries involved in the Arab Spring and the role of Western powers and a Middle East divided along the Sunni and Shia fault line.

The contest is a complex one, but a common denominator appears to emerge, i.e. a change in approach by all North African countries with regards to the West, the consequences of which should be closely analysed, particularly by Europe.

A review of our position and prospects is urgently required given that the social unrest that affected southern Mediterranean coastal countries has significantly changed the reasons that underpinned and justified Europe's ties with the former regimes. These reasons were essentially linked to our energy requirements, the control of immigration flows, defence against Islamist terrorism and the opening up of North African markets for European economic and trade interests.

So far Europe appears to be struggling to develop an innovative, long-term Mediterranean partnership strategy, hindered also by dominant, conflicting bilateral concerns that have fuelled the region's economic and social crisis.

We have seen on the contrary how the Gulf monarchies, Saudi Arabia in particular, offered the region generous support and by so doing earned significant political advantages. The financing of the pre-revolution regimes was often in ways that can only be described as unscrupulous and which had begun long before the onset of the Arab Spring.

Clearly, the more attractive such generous support appears, the more it highlights the causes of the popular revolt. In fact, the social and economic conditions North African countries are currently experiencing and their prospects for improvement will condition to a great extent the political direction these countries will take in the near future.

In the next paragraphs, I will examine each of the North African countries where events associated with the Arab Spring took place, starting with the country least affected.

2.

Algeria was only marginally hit by the protests. A probable explanation for this is the population's incomplete recovery from the years of Islamic terrorism and its fears of a return to instability that could be determined by changes to the political and institutional *status quo* and balances of power. The regime led by the 76-year old Bouteflika in fact appears to be anchored not only on his being guaranteed power but also on the possibility of his creating a sort of hereditary dominion. Changes to government and restructuring of the security services go in this direction and are part of constitutional modifications that legitimate a fourth term of office or the presentation of an approved candidate, ignoring the promise made in April 2011 to "enact serious democratic reforms".

Short-term obstacles to Bouteflika's political ambitions are resurgent terrorist threats combined with ill health.

The same obstacles will remain in the medium term, characterised by a paralysed system and rampant corruption.

3.

After Algeria, Morocco is the second country least-affected by the revolutionary events of 2011 and appears to offer real chances of stability. Its major strength lies in the solidity of the reigning royal house and the ability shown by Mohammed VI to manage the difficulties afflicting the country, which range from ethnic issues (the Berbers) to social injustice and subsequent high rates of poverty and unemployment. A serious limit, however, to Mohammed VI's highly publicised reformist strategy is his continuing control of the country's decisional nerve centres.

In this nebulous setting, the Islamic Justice and Development Party (Muslim Brotherhood), election winners, promptly formed a

coalition government. After this collapsed, a new government was formed after months of consultations. Today, the Prime Minister Abdelilah Benkirane enjoys a comfortable majority, though the price he has had to pay is the abandonment of some early ambitious objectives, such as the fight against corruption and a divestment by the monarchy of key prerogatives in core decision-making areas.

Morocco has managed to portray an image, even during the unrest of recent years, of relative stability and a desire for cooperation with Western and Gulf partners. In fact, foreign direct investments perhaps represent the most important lever to address the country's social and economic problems by developing its role as a manufacturing hub oriented to exports destined for Europe, as a tourist destination and a recipient of capital inflows from Islamic monarchies.

4.

Egypt's transition continues to be a traumatic one. Several factors can be identified: first, the obvious reluctance of the armed forces, post-Mubarak, to embrace real change; second, the election victory of the Muslim Brotherhood led by Morsi and his subsequent slide towards authoritarianism together with an inability to address adequately the country's grave problems; third, the resurgence of popular protests in response to the Egyptian military's ousting of President Morsi on 30th June 2013.

After two and a half years the country is back to where it started with a revamped Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and the fierce repression of the now-outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, the confiscation of whose assets and arrests of its leaders harks back tellingly to the Nasser years; years that undoubtedly sowed the seeds of Islamist terrorism.

Egypt is today at a stalemate in which the apparent lull in the violence crucially depends on which direction the Muslim Brotherhood decides to take: a clandestine reconstruction of its organisation; closer ties with Salaphite and Al Qaeda movements; micro-guerilla warfare in the country's major cities? We shall have to wait and see whether the outcome will be some form of precarious stability.

The fact remains that currently the armed forces and General el-Sisi in particular enjoy considerable support even amongst many of the earliest protest groups. Egypt's military rule does not appear unduly preoccupied with reservations about its performance from

the West, primarily from the United States. Nevertheless, Egypt's military will undoubtedly have taken into account Washington's decision, unlike that of the African Union, not to define Morsi's overthrow as a coup d'état. Secretary of State, John Kerry's visit on 3rd November 2013 was a further clear sign of the United States's desire to keep the door open.

The role of the Gulf monarchies from Saudi Arabia to the United Arab Emirates appears to be increasingly important. The Emirates in fact offered the el-Sisi regime a financial lifeline of more than \$12 billion that could be raised further should the IMF and other major foreign investors continue a "wait and see" approach.

5.

Libya's situation is the most critical in the area. The fall of Ghedaffi set off a meltdown of the country's legal, political and institutional apparatus that had been built around the ex-leader. Inter-tribal, ethnic and nationalistic equilibrium, a remnant of Italian colonialism also appears to be in freefall, which is not surprising given that national unity coincided with Ghedaffi and no form of political-security safety net has been put in place to manage the post-Ghedaffi scenario. The absence of such a safety net is starkly evident as the various militia, tribal and Islamist groups that took part in the regime change now fight amongst themselves for the weapons arsenal that had been built up during the Ghedaffi years. This competition has encouraged the emergence of Jihadist groups that benefit greatly from the fragmentation amongst Islamists, moderates, progressives, liberals and tribal groups more attracted to questions of internal loyalties than an overarching national unity.

In spite of some tenuous signs of progress, the kidnapping of the Prime Minister, events in Cyrenaica, the political use of oil wells and the creation of a separatist oil firm, the new Libyan Oil and Gas Corp, the influence of the two Islamist power blocks in the National Congress determined to exclude the liberal component of the country and the influential Magarha and Warfalla tribes from the political power game, are all worrying signs of insecurity and instability.

It is to be hoped that the transition government finds some form of solution to the country's problems also with help from Western countries that in Libya have to bear some of the blame; this includes of course Italy, which has significant interests in the country that range from oil to the management of migration flows.

6.

Could Tunisia be a role model for the region? The country is still a long way from a definitive constitution and an electoral legitimation that allows the country to move beyond its current transitional phase. In fact, it has taken four governments and two political murders to reach finally a National Dialogue involving all the country's political forces called on to resolve a series of unsolved issues.

There are two reasons for cautious optimism: firstly, a Muslim Brotherhood that appears able not only to work in coalition with secular groups, but also to accept the will of widespread public protest at the beginning of 2013 with the Jebali government despite the electoral consensus received in October 2011. They are doing the same now with the Ali Larayedh government in search of a government led by a Prime Minister with the maximum possible consensus of Tunisian society. Secondly, representative portions of Tunisian society appear determined to take the driving seat in directing political forces towards mutually beneficial forms of political dialogue. The four groups who came forward and known collectively as the "Quartet" were the Tunisian UGTT labour union, already a key player in the fall of Ben Ali, the UTICA business and professional lobby, the Tunisia League for the Defence of Human Rights, and the Lawyers Guild. This uncommon union of mediation, which could usefully be replicated elsewhere in the region, seems above all to be the only body able to deliver a series of objectives set by the National Dialogue initiative, i.e. the identification of a consensus prime minister, the completion of the new constitution and elections that mark once and for all the end of the transition started in January 2011.

If the Quartet succeeds, Tunisia will make a decisive step towards renewed cooperation with the European Union and Italy above all.