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Authoritarianism, revolution and democracy: Egypt and beyond

AMIN SAIKAL*

The pro-democracy Arab popular uprisings have been spontaneous, but perhaps not all that unpredictable. They have come against the backdrop of a growing gulf between the rulers and the ruled, political repression, social and economic inequalities, demographic changes, unemployment and foreign policy debacles. Although the uprisings began in Tunisia, it is the case of Egypt that illustrates the situation more compellingly and the impact that it has had on the rest of the Arab world. It is not clear at this stage what will be the ultimate outcome. But what can be said with certainty is that the Arab peoples have set out on a long journey in pursuit of genuine self-determination. The journey will be arduous and unsettling for the Arabs and outsiders, but this has to be treated as part of a transition from a dictatorial past to a politically pluralist future.

Keywords: the Arab world; authoritarianism; democracy; international relations; Middle East; politics; revolution

For the first time in nearly 800 years, the Arab people are on the march to determine their future. Since the Mongol sacking of the glorious capital of the Arab Abbasid Islamic Empire, Baghdad, in 1258, their fate has been very much determined by outside powers—ranging from the Ottomans to European colonial powers, especially Britain and France, culminating in the US geopolitical dominance of the Middle East following the Second World War. The Arab populace has now opened up an unprecedented opportunity to shape their polities independent of outsiders, although the degree of difficulties involved in this process cannot be underestimated.

The Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions and the popular uprisings they inspired across the Arab world have shaken the Arab authoritarian regimes and confronted the US and its allies—Israel in particular—with serious policy

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quandaries. This time, the Arab peoples' demand is for a pro-democratic transformation of their societies, driven by them rather than outside powers and the governing elites which have repeatedly failed in their promise to deliver democratic reforms and good governance. The Egyptians and Tunisians have broken the yoke of dictatorial rule, and their fellow Arabs in many other parts of the Middle East are locked in a struggle—sometimes very bloody, as in the case of Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and Syria—in pursuit of a similar objective. The Tunisian uprising provided the initial spark but it was the Egyptian revolution that opened the floodgates, given the country's pivotal status in the Arab world.

Egypt forms the main subject matter of this article, with three aims. The first is to discuss the rule of the Western-backed President Hosni Mubarak (1981–2011) and the contextual circumstances that facilitated the revolution. The second is to look at the present prospects for Egypt's democratic transformation. The third is to evaluate the wider implications of the Egyptian developments.

Mubarak's rule

After assuming power in the wake of President Anwar al-Sadat's assassination in 1981 by a member of a Muslim extremist group who was opposed to Sadat's 1979 peace treaty with Israel,¹ Mubarak set out to rule by a state of emergency under Law No. 162, which extended police powers, legitimised censorship and suspended constitutional rights (Singerman 2002). Contrary to promising a better and gentler government, he strengthened the authoritarian system of party-bureaucratic-security governance, which had been established to a large extent under his two predecessors, Sadat and Gamal Abdul Nasser, who overthrew Egypt's pro-British monarchy and declared the country an Arab nationalist republic in 1952 (for more on Nasser, see Beattie 1994; Kankowski 2002). He stubbornly refused to recognise that such a model had generally been doomed to failure and had ultimately resulted in political and socio-economic stagnation and foreign policy debacles. He expanded the powers of the Interior Ministry and intelligence services which routinely engaged in torture and human rights violation as a means of rule enforcement. In 2010, various sources argued that the number of Egyptian political prisoners ranged from 15,000 to 30,000.

Like many other autocrats, Mubarak became increasingly self-centred, all-knowing and delusional, thinking that he was the only person capable of leading Egypt. He found it both threatening and degrading even to appoint a vice-president. While amending the Constitution of 1971, he empowered himself over the years as the sole arbiter of the Egyptian polity.²

All forms of political dissent – whether secular or religious – were suppressed under him, and he put the Egyptian public and the international community on a warning that the alternative to his regime would be an Islamic fundamentalist

takeover, led by the oldest counter-systemic movement, the banned Muslim Brotherhood (for more on the Muslim Brotherhood, see Mitchell 1993; Pargeter 2011; Rubin 2010). The presidential and parliamentary elections that he staged were farcical, with Mubarak as the only presidential candidate. A flawed electoral system enabled his ruling National Democratic Party to claim overwhelming victory, election after election. For all intents and purposes, Egypt became a one-party state (see Saikal 2003: 117–19). The secularist nationalist Wafd Party, which was the most popular liberal political force between the two World Wars, gradually declined from 1951, and Mubarak ensured its confinement into insignificance (for more on the Wafd Party, see Deeb 1979). The Muslim Brotherhood, established in 1928, was subjected to a systematic campaign to present it as a major Islamist menace to Egypt and beyond. Feeling progressively threatened by the growing popularity and organisational strength of the Brotherhood, he let his security forces unrestrainedly target the group, frequently interning and harassing its leaders and members. Even so, from 1984 the group managed to field ‘independent’ candidates in the parliamentary elections, with a major triumph in the 2005 elections when it won 88 seats in a 518-seat parliament. However, in the 2010 parliamentary elections, the government made sure, through intimidation and fraud, that the Brotherhood did not win a single seat. The elections attracted widespread international condemnation (see Mohammed 2010).

Mubarak’s performance on the economic and social fronts produced mixed results and could not compensate for his iron-fist approach to governance. His policies nurtured a rich and corrupt governing elite, and a weak but nonetheless burgeoning middle class. Yet they did little to improve the lot of a great majority of the impoverished Egyptian masses. After pursuing more or less the old Nasserite policies of centralisation during the 1980s, from 1991 he largely embraced International Monetary Fund and internationally sponsored reforms aimed at attracting foreign direct investment (FDI), which he accelerated from 2004 (for more on the Egyptian economy, see Khayr al-Dīn 2008). This helped produce a promising period of economic growth, entailing wider social changes and awareness. Between 2006 and 2010, Egypt’s GDP grew from US\$107 billion to US\$217 billion, and per capita income, taking into account purchasing power parity, grew from US\$4,679 to US\$5,862 (Economic Intelligence Unit 2011). However, given the nature of Mubarak’s rule and its inherent anomalies, including favouring big businesses and privatisation over workers’ rights, the growth largely benefited Mubarak and his ruling elite, which came to own most of the nation’s wealth. It did not result in a degree of social and economic development and wealth distribution that could satisfy the middle class and help the poor strata of the society to lead themselves out of poverty in either the slums of the urban centres, especially Cairo, or in the rural areas. Meanwhile, Egypt’s imports exceeded its exports by a large margin, and its external debt grew to about 20 to 30 percent of its GDP or around US\$33 billion in 2010 (Economic Intelligence Unit 2011). From 2008, Egypt was also affected by the global

financial crisis, which shrank its public and private sector activities to a noticeable extent.

In 2009, Egypt's GDP growth rate dropped from 7 percent in 2008 to 5 percent, FDI diminished by 40 percent, unemployment reached an estimated 30 percent and inflation some 30 percent, although the official figures told a different story.³ Economic growth and national productivity simply could not keep pace with Egypt's rapidly increasing population, growing from some 50 million in the early 1980s to more than 83 million in 2010. From 2005 to 2010, the percentage of Egyptians that considered themselves as 'thriving', with a positive view towards their current life situation and the future, fell from 29 to 11 percent (Clifton and Morales 2011).

An outcome of the rapid population growth has been serious demographic changes. Today some 70 percent of Egyptians are under the age of 30 (see Amer 2009). As more people graduated from upper-secondary and tertiary educational institutions, there were not sufficient and relevant employment opportunities and democratic safety valves in terms of greater participation to divert them from becoming more frustrated with and alienated from Mubarak's leadership (on the youth in Egypt, see Assaad 2008; Bowker 2010: Chapter 3). Mubarak seemed to be insensitive to the growing gulf between the ruler and the ruled, and between the state and society. To a majority of the Egyptian public, all he seemed to care about was himself, his family and his ruling apparatus, with an intention to provide for his son, Gamal, to succeed him, preserving the worst features of his rule and transforming Egypt into a dynastic republic.

In foreign policy, he could not carry many Egyptians with him either. He firmly upheld Egypt's peace treaty with Israel, and strengthened the country's ties as a loyal ally with the United States; he considered both as critical aids to his rule. Peace with Israel meant not only being free of any costly conflict, but also more financial and military kudos from the United States. America's roughly US\$1.3 billion assistance per year proved to be critical for him to keep his military and security brass, as well as key administrative personnel, content. He publicly supported the right of the Palestinians to an independent state of their own and opposed expansion of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. However, he balanced this with a quiet policy approach that assisted Israel in playing off the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority, which has been in charge of the West Bank, against the Islamist Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since mid-2007. He helped Israel enforce its illegal blockade of Gaza, entailing collective punishment of the Strip's 1.5 million citizens, in order to undermine the rule of Hamas, which Israel and its international supporters have condemned as a 'terrorist organisation' (on Hamas, see Milton-Edwards and Farrell 2010; Tamimi 2007). He remained oblivious to the fact that Hamas won the January 2006 Palestinian general elections democratically. Beyond this, he initially concurred with Washington and London on backing Israel's devastating, though ultimately unsuccessful, military campaign against Lebanon in order to destroy the Iranian and Syrian

backed Hezbollah in 2006.⁴ He certainly opposed the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, but fully cooperated with the Bush administration on rendition and torture. In all this, he sided with the conservative Arab forces and dampened Nasser's policy of Arab nationalism, even more than Sadat had done.

Yet, for all this, he achieved nothing as far as a viable and lasting settlement of the Palestinian problem was concerned. He could not move Israel towards withdrawing to its pre-1967 border in order to allow the creation of an independent Palestinian state, with East Jerusalem as its capital. This left him extremely vulnerable to a strong view among many Egyptians and the Arab peoples across the region that he was pro-Israeli and pro-American, more to maintain his power than anything else. According to various public opinion surveys, the bulk of young Egyptians increasingly found his policy behaviour affronting, and a good number of old Egyptians felt demeaned over their country losing the leadership that it had once enjoyed in the Arab world (see Dowek 2001; Makar 2007). They were also progressively troubled by the fact that three non-Arab states, Israel, Iran and Turkey, had come to be far more influential players than Egypt in shaping regional politics. Disenfranchised, suppressed and alienated by Mubarak's policies, all the Egyptian people needed now was a trigger.

This soon came, in the form of protests and demonstrations in Tunisia following the 17 December 2010 self-immolation of one Mohammed Bouazizi, a fruit seller who had become disgruntled with the government. By 14 January 2011, Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali had fled the country, and the head of the Arab League and Egypt's former Foreign Minister, Amr Musa, said that 'the Arab soul is broken'. Speaking at an Arab Economic Summit in Egypt, Musa blamed 'poverty, unemployment and general recession'. He stated that 'the Tunisian revolution is not far from us', and warned that 'the Arab citizens [have] entered an unprecedented state of anger and frustration', which could only be addressed by an Arab 'renaissance' (Slackman and El-Nagggar 2011). He could not have put it more aptly, except that as a seasoned diplomat he refrained from mentioning political repression and corruption as further central reasons, of which most of the leaders around the table were guilty. The 82-year-old Mubarak was among those leaders, but he appeared so confident of his rule that he did not make a reference to the Tunisian revolution, let alone digest Musa's warning.

Not long after, following 18 days of an unprecedented spontaneous public uprising in the modern history of Egypt, Mubarak found himself with no choice but to hand over power on 11 February to the High Command of the Armed Forces, under his long-serving and aged Defence Minister, Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, to manage Egypt's transition to a democracy. Thus Mubarak's rule—which delivered to Egypt nearly 30 years of peace and security, but at the cost of democratic reforms, equitable socio-economic development and a dynamic foreign policy—came to a sudden and largely unforeseeable end.

He went down the same way as two Western-backed Middle Eastern autocrats before him: Ben Ali of Tunisia and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran. Certain parallels between the Iranian revolution of 1978–79 and the Egyptian uprising are inescapable. Like the Iranian revolution, the Egyptian phenomenon commenced spontaneously, without any specific group or individuals leading it, and targeted a Western-backed ruler whose autocratic leadership and policy behaviour generated the kind of conditions that the people could no longer endure. It took the Iranian people 25 years to marshal their energy against the Shah since his instalment on the throne by the US Central Intelligence Agency in 1953 (Saikal 2009: 44–5), and the same was more or less true with the Egyptians.

The Egyptian people now face difficult choices and priorities, fraught with unpredictable developments, including whether the military will and can facilitate a credible transition, as it has rarely acted in history as an agent of democratic change. The process may prove to be turbulent, arduous and painful, but at the end a new pluralist and participatory order may well be the result, with a serious impact on the Middle Eastern geopolitical landscape. Can the Egyptian people and their fellow Arabs rebuild the Arab soul and assume the critical voice that they deserve in shaping their politics along democratic lines?

Democratic prospects

As was the case with the Shah, Mubarak left an Egypt that has had no tradition of democracy and no necessary institutional and procedural foundations—such as an appropriate legal–rational framework, respect for the rule of law, separation of powers, independent judiciary, vibrant civil society and constitutional guarantees and respect for minorities—that could easily facilitate its transition to a democracy. In this kind of situation, there is always the risk of a power vacuum being created that a well-organised group, with a culturally and socially relevant ideological agenda, can fill and divert the revolution from its original goal. This is what happened in Iran, enabling the charismatic, popular and politically shrewd Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini and his supporters to seize the leadership of the revolution halfway through 1978, and transform it from an anti-Shah revolution in pursuit of democratic rights and freedoms into an Islamic one in order to institute a theocratic order, with an anti-US and anti-Israeli posture. Khomeini drew on the anger of the Iranian people over America’s support of the Shah, the Shah’s close relations with Israel, and America’s unqualified backing of Israel, to achieve his Islamist objectives. Washington’s failure to back away from the Shah’s rule until the eleventh hour and to support the democratic forces, which had initially spearheaded the revolution, played an important part in helping Khomeini and his supporters to triumph, and in sowing the seeds of a US–Iranian hostility that continues to

the present day at the cost of much anxiety for both Washington and Jerusalem (for more on the Iranian revolution and its consequences, see Saikal 2009: xix–xxxvii).

In a similar vein, the Egyptian revolution also remains vulnerable to a takeover by a specific group, especially if Egypt remains in the political doldrums and its transition is not managed prudently and effectively, as was the case with the Iranian revolution. The Muslim Brotherhood is often touted as the best-organised and most popular movement, with a capacity to take advantage of the current disorder. However, the Brotherhood is not in as favourable a position as Khomeini's Islamists were in Iran. Despite all the fuss made about it by the Mubarak leadership, the Brotherhood is divided. It is made up of a spectrum of Islamists—ranging from radicals to conservative pragmatists and moderates, with the latter two categories constituting the bulk of its members (Brown 2011). It therefore has no charismatic and popular leader like Khomeini to command them as a united front. In the absence of any reliable figure, one estimate puts its core membership at about 100,000, although a more reasonable figure would be around 200,000, with a capacity to poll about 30 percent of the vote in a fair and free election (see Pargeter 2011; Rubin 2010).

Although there are some ideological and operational differences between the Brotherhood, which is now represented by the Freedom and Justice Party, and the Salafist cluster, which has recently formed the Nour Party, both are nonetheless Islamists advocating political Islam as the framework for Egypt's transformation. According to an Aljazeera public opinion survey released on 7 July 2011, 46 percent of those polled indicated first preference for the Brotherhood, and another 27 percent expressed support for the Salafists (IkhanWeb 2011). Under the right conditions, some Salafists can be expected to join forces with the Brotherhood, enabling the latter to win the parliamentary elections scheduled for November 2011 and form a government in its own right, headed by a prime minister from its ranks or beholden to it. So far, the Brotherhood has denied that it plans to field a candidate for the presidential election. But this does not mean that it will fail to support a preferred candidate. If the Brotherhood and Salafists maintain their current upward trajectory, the pro-democracy secularist forces that spearheaded the revolution may find it difficult to outvote them, given these forces' lack of necessary organisational strength and popular appeal.

However, should a Brotherhood electoral victory materialise, the party is unlikely to be able or willing to move Egypt down the path of a theocratic order, similar to what has developed in Iran. As the oldest party since its foundation in 1928, it has learnt through bitter experience that if it fails to secure popular support for its policies, it will have little chance of hanging on to power for too long. The party's mainstream leadership seems already to have shifted its posture in pursuit of centre-right realistic policy priorities and goals. It has to deal with a new Egypt, whose political scene has opened up for participatory political pluralism, and to operate within the constraints of such a

development. The Egyptian polity is now made up of various ideological and political streams, with its youth more aware and connected than ever before. Also, it is important to note that 10–15 percent of the country's population are Coptic Christians, many of whom supported the mass protests against Mubarak, and who will not be receptive to a Brotherhood-led Islamist order. Meanwhile, it cannot be negligent of the fact that Egypt's military leadership is pro-secular, with close ties with the United States.

The Military Council that has effectively governed Egypt since Mubarak's fall can be expected to manage Egypt's transition in a way which could result in the creation of a pluralist, participatory order, and retain a key role for itself in politics, as has been the case in Egypt since the 1952 coup. Nasser promised genuine democracy; so did his two successors, Sadat and Mubarak, but none of them delivered it. In varying degrees, they all ruled with heavy reliance on military and security forces. Egypt has one of the largest and best-equipped standing armies (for more on the modern Egyptian army, see Frisch 2001). It is composed of half a million rank and file, and has enormously benefited from annual American assistance to Egypt. It not only is a warfare machine, but also has a substantial share in the country's economic and industrial life. Scholars put its share of the economy at anything from 5 to 30 percent (Simpson and Fam 2011). In this sense, it is an INC (Incorporation)—similar to the military in Pakistan, which has directly or indirectly (through civilian governments) ruled that country for most of the time since its creation in 1947.

The military's role in the fall of Mubarak was certainly double-edged. On the one hand, it expressed a degree of public sympathy with the protestors and refrained from quelling them by force. On the other, it remained loyal to the state, with a resolve that it would end the state of emergency only if the protestors went home and the situation returned to normal. Since taking over power, the military has responded to a number of popular demands. It has instituted a broad-based civilian transitional government, set up a commission that amended the Constitution, ratified a referendum on 19 March 2011 (which among other things limits the duration of presidency to two four-year terms), and dissolved the parliament, with a commitment to hold democratic parliamentary elections in November 2011. It has allowed the prosecution and jailing of a number of Mubarak's ministers, including the former Interior Minister, for corruption and abuse of power. More importantly, it has consented to Mubarak and his two sons being arrested and put on trial, with their enormous assets at home and abroad being frozen. Mubarak's appearance in court on charges of malpractice (including responsibility for the killing of more than 800 protestors leading up to his overthrow) on 3 August 2011 marked a defining moment in Egypt's transition. This was the first time in Arab and Egyptian history that a ruler has publicly been tried and humiliated by his own people.

Meanwhile, the military's popular actions have been punctuated by a degree of self-centredness and heavy-handedness whenever desirable. Its approach since taking over the running of the country has resulted in the intimidation, arrest and torture of a number of pro-democracy elements, with some allegedly still languishing in prisons. It has repeatedly warned against illegal protests and industrial strikes, and used force on occasion to break them up. It has been accused of serious human rights violations—an accusation which is confirmed and taken up by a number of credible sources, including Human Rights Watch (2011).

A majority of the Egyptians so far seem to have given the military the benefit of the doubt, but it is not clear whether it has the necessary inherent political wisdom and dispassionate self-interest to deliver on its promise to reflect the will of the people. The factor that cushions the public against the military misbehaving is its concern to avoid outright confrontation with the people who have driven the military to power. This, together with the evidence of growing public support for Islamists, may leave the military leaders with only one viable course of action: to intertwine the military's integrity and stability with those of the Egyptian people, and to deliver a transition to a pluralist order. Despite their devotion to Islam as their faith and their widespread sympathy for Islamist forces, a great number of Egyptians have evidently also turned their back on any form of governance which could compromise their democratic rights and freedoms, with a firm quest for a mode of social and economic development and foreign policy behaviour that could reinforce their position in charting Egypt's future.

At present, there is no single person with sufficient national stature to lead Egypt's democratic transformation as its elected leader. Yet it is worth emphasising that Egypt requires not a change of leader but a change of system from an authoritarian past to a democratic future. Anything short of this would leave the country in political and social-economic limbo in which its people have languished for a long time. The age of 'rulers for life' that historically dominated Egypt has gone. Its society is evolving under the growing influence of a well-informed social media generation, capable of countering the kind of manipulation that had made the Egyptian people vulnerable to their rulers. Its revolution has to deliver a political order very different from what the Egyptians have experienced since 1952. For this new order to work, it will have to be pluralist, inclusive and popularly legitimated.

Wider implications

Egypt is a pivotal Arab state. It is the most populous state in the region, with the largest pool of educated people, a strong industrial and technical base, and the most visible military strength. What happens in Egypt can have greater impact on fellow Arab countries than can initially be envisaged. Egypt can no longer be expected to pursue the same foreign policy goals and priorities as before. With

so much public dissatisfaction over Mubarak's relations with Israel and the USA, the new Egyptian government may well find it imperative to rationalise these relations to the extent necessary to satisfy various political forces, including the Muslim Brotherhood, which has in the past opposed Egypt's peace treaty with Israel and voiced an aversion to close ties with the USA. A credible public opinion, released by Pew Global Research on 25 April 2011, has revealed that some 54 percent of Egyptians want the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty of 1979 to be scrapped and a high percentage have also called for the downgrading of Egypt's relations with the USA (Pew Research Center 2011). Egypt's developments have already reverberated throughout the Arab world, with an impetus to change the regional geopolitical status quo.

The Egyptian developments have provided an unprecedented boost to secular and religious opposition in fellow Arab countries and have opened up new opportunities for those forces that no longer find their individual national situations tolerable. They have helped the wind of pro-democracy reform and genuine self-determination to sweep across the Arab world, from Bahrain to Syria to Yemen to Libya, where it has resulted in bloody struggles between the regimes and citizens.

In the case of Bahrain, whose crisis also has a sectarian dimension, given the rule of a Sunni minority monarchy over a majority Shi'ite population, it has led to a Saudi Arabian military intervention within the frame of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) alliance.⁵ The Saudi monarch, as a very close ally of the USA since 1945, has been terribly disenchanted with Washington for not backing another reliable US ally, Mubarak, in his hour of need, and has viewed a change of regime in Bahrain as a serious threat to its own stability and that of its GCC partners (for more on the US-Saudi relationship, see Hart 1998). The Saudi intervention in Bahrain, to which the USA may have consented, has amounted to a direct challenge to Iran, whose Islamic regime has championed the cause of Shi'ite Islam and some of whose ruling clerics have revived from time to time Iran's historical claim over Bahrain.

Of course, a Saudi-Iranian military confrontation is most unlikely. This is primarily because the Iranian Shi'ite Islamic regime faces its own serious domestic problems on the one hand, and wants to maintain the regional leverage that it has gained (mainly due to American policy failures over the years in Iraq, Afghanistan and Lebanon) through alliance with various sub-national groups and strategic partnership with Syria on the other. Meanwhile, the persistent Sunni majority pro-democracy protests against the minority Alawite-dominated government in Syria cannot but be very worrying for the Iranian regime. Its close ties with its only Arab ally are critical to its backing of the militant Shi'ite Hezbollah in Lebanon and various radical Shi'ite forces in Iraq, most importantly Muqtadr al-Sadr's group, and also in leveraging against the USA and its regional allies, Israel in particular (on the Syria-Iran relationship, see Goodarzi 2006). So it is in Tehran's interests to do whatever it can to shore up Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria, much to the annoyance of not

only the USA and Israel, but also to many Arab countries, led by Saudi Arabia. Even so, an increase in a struggle by proxy between Saudi Arabia and Iran as two main regional rivals cannot be ruled out. Both sides can be expected to enhance their assistance to various Shi'ite and Sunni groups wherever possible and desirable in the region.

As for Libya, the opposition to Colonel Mu'mmar al-Qadhafi has been more violent and bloody than anywhere else. The Libyan dictator had learned from the relatively easy fall of Ben Ali and Mubarak not to give in to public pressure. This prolonged the opposition's struggle and the UN and US-backed NATO air campaign and other measures in support of them for six months until their final capture of the Libyan capital, Tripoli, in late August. However, Gadhafi and two of his sons still remain at large, and the future of Libya remains quite unpredictable. What is achieved so far has been at a very high cost for Libya, from which its citizens may not recover for a generation to come, as has been the case with Iraq following the 2003 US-led invasion of the country.

At this stage, the other Gulf Arab states do not seem to be as prone to popular unrest as Bahrain. With substantial oil largess and small populations, they have been able to control any uprising, especially with help from a considerable US military and security presence on their soils. As for the Saudi monarchy itself, which is the largest and most resourceful state within the GCC, it appears to be quite immune to major disturbances. Four factors count in favour of the regime. The first is its control of the country's oil largess, which has enabled King Abdullah, the Saudi monarch, to build up a sovereign fund of some US\$500 billion and make use of it whenever needed to buy popular support and silence the regime's critics. The second is the size of the Saudi royal family, which is composed of some 7000 princes and princesses, most of whom have a vested interest in preserving the Ibn Saud rule. Many of them have marital linkages to various tribes and a large share in the economic and sociocultural life of their country. The third is Saudi Arabia's demographic spread. Most of the Saudi population live in a few main urban centres, and these centres are sufficiently distant from one another to enable the regime to isolate one of them in the event of major public protest from the rest of the country and quell the protest without much national ramifications, as it dealt with the uprising in Mecca in 1979. This is not to claim that the Saudis do not have access to social media; they do, but the regime is well organised to shut the social media down when required. The fourth is the strong US civilian and military presence in the Kingdom. The USA not only has a strong security presence on Saudi soil, but its military and civilian apparatus are very active in various capacities at all levels in the country (for more on Saudi Arabia, see Cordesman 2009; Niblock 2006).

As for non-Arab Iran, where open domestic opposition commenced in the wake of the fraudulent presidential elections of June 2009—that is, well before the Arab uprisings—its Islamic regime has so far proved to be quite resilient. It has a limited but nonetheless effective religious-nationalist base of support within the urban centres and rural areas, cutting across class lines, and a coercive

capacity to deal with opposition very brutally. This does not mean that the Arab revolts cannot enrich the Iranian opposition. To the contrary, they have already provided much encouragement to the opposition, but in the same way that the predominantly Sunni Arabs have been resistant to emulating the Iranian Shi'ite theocratic leadership and model of governance, a majority of the Iranians cannot be too receptive to what has emerged as an Arab phenomenon either.

However, whatever the future for each country in the region, from this point neither the Arab autocrats nor the Iranian theocrats can afford to be complacent about their rule without engaging in reform to close the gap between them and their citizens. It is often argued that the Shi'ite Muslims are more prone to uprising against their rulers than the Sunni Muslims who had historically proved to be more accommodating of public authorities. The Egyptian and, for that matter, the Tunisian revolutions have proven that the Sunni/Shi'ite divide makes no difference when a large cross-section of the ruled are alienated from and frustrated with their rulers. As such, many leaders across the board are facing serious problems of political legitimacy, governance and socio-economic development. Some have already announced programs of reform, like Morocco, Algeria, Oman and, to some extent, Jordan. The remaining few are likely to be forced to move in a similar direction in order to ensure their survival. The outcome may not be a replica of a Western democracy, but the situation is such that the political landscape of the Middle East is set to change in one form or another, with important implications for the outside world, especially the USA and its allies—implications that cannot be fully predicted at this stage.

Barack Obama's administration seems to have recognised the significance of this: hence its emphasis on reform, meeting the aspirations of the Arab peoples, 'no going back' to what had existed prior to the present crisis, lifting the state of emergency and instituting an 'orderly transition' (Malcolm 2011). In this, Obama has acted more shrewdly than the Carter administration did in relation to the Iranian revolution. However, the challenge will be whether Washington and its allies will be ready to embrace any outcome if it is going to be a result of democratic processes, and whether they will support similar developments to take root in all Arab states and extend the UN principle of 'responsibility to protect' to cover the Palestinian people under Israel occupation. The USA and its allies do not have a solid record in this respect. They refused to recognise the outcome of the Palestinians' democratic elections of January 2006 and sided with Israel in punishing the Palestinian people and the Palestinian Islamist party Hamas, for which they voted. In January 1991, they were in awe over the prospects of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) winning a democratic election in Algeria. Backed by France and domestic liberal forces, the Algerian military intervened, cancelled the election, arrested many FIS leaders and banned the party—a development over which the USA remained conspicuously silent. This helped create the general conditions for many radical members of FIS to go underground and take up arms, resulting in the gruesome killing of some 100,000 Algerians over the next decade. Algeria is still reeling from that

episode, and its overall stability and security remains fragile. In the past, the USA and its allies have persistently preferred authoritarian-driven stability and security over democracy in the Arab world as the cornerstone for maintaining America's geopolitical dominance in the region. Can they now shift to a new paradigm and wear the risks involved?

Conclusion

The Arab world is now subjected to a serious struggle between three forces which want to shape its destiny: pro-democratic pluralism, secular or semi-secular authoritarianism and Islamism. Whilst the first force has spearheaded the current popular revolts in pursuit of structural democratic reforms, the second force does not want to give in easily and the third one has found new opportunities to seek political ascendancy. The three-way contest that has unfolded is likely to be a prominent feature of the Arab domain for some time to come. The outcome is unpredictable. But whatever the result, the Arab political landscape has changed from an authoritarian past to a future which is most likely to be reformist and pluralist in the long run. The revolts have started as an Arab enterprise and mark a new awakening on the part of the Arab peoples. The outside powers need to recognise this, and brace themselves for whatever might be the results. Any foreign intervention to influence this Arab awakening could easily prove to be counterproductive. The Arab peoples deserve to have the opportunity for genuine self-determination.

Notes

1. For an insider's assessment of Sadat's premiership, see Beattie (2000) and Heikal (1983).
2. Mubarak was perhaps mindful of the fact that the last Arab leader to clearly designate a successor, Tunisia's Bourguiba, saw this successor, Ben Ali, depose him.
3. On some perspectives on the global financial crisis's effect on the Egyptian economy and recent Egyptian policies, see American Chamber of Commerce in Egypt (2010) and Bowker (2010).
4. On Hezbollah, see Norton (2007). For more on Hezbollah's perspectives, see Noe (2007).
5. The GCC was founded as a defensive alliance primarily against Iran in 1981. Its membership is made up of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

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