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Egypt's Youth Uprising: Its Global Dimensions

By Barry Desker

Synopsis

Egypt's current uprising is very much a rebellion of the youth. This sub-text cuts across a large swathe of North Africa and the Middle East, and to a certain extent, Asia as well. This global dimension of the youthful challenge will have far-reaching implications.

Commentary

EGYPT'S VICE President Omar Suleiman met opposition groups including supporters of Mohamed ElBaradei, the Muslim Brotherhood and small left-wing parties on 6 February 2011. His aim was to forge an agreement which would permit an orderly transition when President Mubarak steps down at the end of his term of office in September this year. They agreed to set up a committee of leading judicial and political figures to study proposed constitutional amendments enabling more candidates to run for the presidency and imposing term limits for the president.

To meet protesters' demands, it was agreed that action would be taken to prosecute those involved in corruption as well as those responsible for the removal of police from Cairo's streets a week ago which resulted in looting and arson. Investigations would also be undertaken of complaints by political prisoners.

Demands of the Youth

These agreements do not address the demands of youthful protesters camped out in Tahrir Square in Cairo nor of their compatriots in Alexandria and Port Suez who see themselves as being on the frontlines of the Egyptian uprising. Their principal demand is that Mubarak steps down immediately. But this arouses fear among governments in the United States, Europe and Asia and even UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon that Mubarak's hasty departure could result in a leadership vacuum in Egypt. For the protesters, even anarchy may be better than the grim future that they foresee for themselves.

Egypt's population has expanded from 30 million in 1966 to 85 million today largely living along the Nile River. Its people crowd the 40,000 square kilometres of land suitable for housing and farming. There is a growing shortage of arable land while economic growth has not matched population growth. Youth unemployment is increasing rapidly as more than 4 per cent of the population enters the work force each year. Unemployment for university graduates is ten times that of the general population. Rising costs of food, accommodation and petrol has fuelled the recent unrest.

The danger is that the Egyptian political class will see the return of some normalcy to Cairo's streets with the re-opening of banks, cafes and shops and the resumption of normal bus and train services as the end of the uprising. They will welcome the expansion of political freedoms and the promises to abolish the emergency law. Such restrictions permitted censorship and indefinite detention without trial while sharply curtailing street demonstrations, non-approved political organisations and unregistered financial donations to political groupings.

Satisfying the Youth Bulges

However, this expansion of political space is unlikely to satisfy the youthful protesters who feel empowered by Facebook, Twitter and reports in the international media. For these activists, politics is a zero-sum game and they will not be satisfied by the concessions they have obtained. They will push for Mubarak's removal and a fundamental change of regime. But they are likely to be frustrated. We should expect claims from them that the revolution has been hijacked by the apparatchiks of the regime if an orderly transition is achieved.

The youth uprising in Egypt draws attention to the impact of similar youth bulges as a result of rapid population increases over the past 20 years, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, Iran and Turkey as well as a crescent extending from the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza, Iraq, Saudi Arabia and Yemen to Afghanistan and Pakistan. The authoritarian polities and lack of employment opportunities in many of these states in the crescent and their continuing rapid population growth will fuel youth resentment and rebellion, with a significant risk of political volatility and violence.

By contrast, over the next 20 years, the Maghreb countries, Iran and Turkey will see declines in their rate of population growth. They should benefit from growing numbers of educated youth in their expanding economies, just like Vietnam, Malaysia and Indonesia. The medium term outlook for these states is therefore positive.

The Asian Situation

Turning to other parts of Asia, although India's population will increase to 1.45 billion by 2025, it will benefit from economic growth. However, there are sharp differences among the regions – namely, the high-growth commercial centres of Mumbai, Delhi and Kolkata; the low fertility states of South India with their information technology hubs and booming services sector; and the 'Hindi speaking' belt of north India with its higher fertility, lower educational levels, lower levels of female employment and slower growth of the services sector. Youthful challenges to the political status quo are more likely in north India.

By contrast, in China, we will see more conservative attitudes as a combination of economic growth, the rapid aging of China's population and the expectations of a better life by China's youth result in a preference for the status quo. Already, China's Internet savvy youth are among the most nationalist and have been active in pushing for strong government action in the face of perceived slights by external parties such as the United States, Japan and, in the case of the South China Sea, even Asean.

The volatile mix in the greater Middle East makes this the region with the highest potential for political violence and conflict. The youth uprising in Egypt is a harbinger of the challenge which will be faced by rulers of these youthful states with rising but unmet expectations.

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