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Role of Arab militaries in popular uprisings

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

The structure and role of the armed forces in Egypt and Tunisia made the relatively peaceful overthrow of autocratic rulers in both countries the exception in the Middle East and North Africa. Similarly the structure of the military helps explain the violence in Libya, Syria and Yemen. It foreshadows worse violence in countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia should their regimes face similar uprisings.

Commentary

THE VIDEOS of the Syrian military shelling some of the country's cities and Libyan forces pounding rebel-held towns present a dramatic picture of relations between the military and civil society across the Middle East and North Africa. Also, scenes of Egyptians protesting the armed forces' alleged efforts to derail their revolution and Bahrainis being crushed by security forces produce a picture of a popular Arab revolt sweeping across two continents from the Gulf to the Atlantic coast. They threaten to put Arab security and military leaders either in the dock of the International Criminal Court in The Hague or on the target board of protesters on Cairo's Tahrir Square.

The picture goes some way to explain the differences in the efforts to create a democracy in Tunisia and Egypt, the two states where the revolt has toppled autocratic leaders; the battles that are engulfing Syria, Libya and Yemen; and the crushing of the uprising in Bahrain. Finally, it creates a framework to predict how revolts will unfold in Middle Eastern nations that have so far been able to contain protests or have yet to be hit by them.

Distrusting the military

One key to understanding the role of the military is the fact that Arab rulers, republican and monarchic, distrust their armed forces. To shield themselves from potential threats by the military, rulers have opted for different models: totally sidelining the military; buying it off with a stake in national security and lucrative economic opportunities; focusing on key units commanded by members of the ruler's family; creating parallel military organisations; staffing the lower and medium ranks with expatriates; or most recently creating a separate mercenary force.

Ironically, the appearance of a uniformed military officer on Egyptian television in February to announce the departure of President Hosni Mubarak and subsequently to read edicts of the country's new military rulers revived memories of the military coups of the 1960s to 1980s in the region as well as elsewhere in the world.

The truth, however, is quite different. The Egyptian military is said to be eager to return to its barracks, but not before it ensures that its interests are protected in and after the transition to democracy. Mubarak secured the military's loyalty by giving it control of national as opposed to homeland security and allowing it to build an

independent relationship with its US counterparts that enabled it to create a military industrial complex as well as a commercial empire in other sectors.

To preserve its prerogatives, the military has announced that it will, prior to elections adopt a declaration of basic principles that would govern the drafting of a constitution. The declaration would be designed to ensure that Egypt's next elected leader will have no choice but to keep the military's interests in mind. Elections would enable the military to return to its barracks but retain its grip on national security, including the right to intervene in politics to protect national unity and the secular character of the state; maintain its direct, unsupervised relationship with the United States; be shielded against civilian oversight and scrutiny of its budget; and keep control of its economic empire. In effect, the military would continue to enjoy the privileged status it had under Mubarak.

Tunisian, Syrian and Libyan models

The Egyptian military's approach is in stark contrast to that of Tunisia, which rid itself of its autocratic leader a month earlier than Egypt did. There a commission is discussing the best way to limit presidential power involving a range of proposals ranging from a presidential to a parliamentary regime. The fact that President Zine El Abedine Ben Ali, in one of his first moves after coming to power, decimated the military and ensured that unlike the Egyptian armed forces it had no stake in the system he built, has meant that the Tunisian force had no reason to obstruct real change; indeed if anything, it was likely to benefit from reform that leads to a democratic system, in which it would have a legitimate role under civilian supervision.

The structure of the military also provides models for responses to popular uprisings elsewhere in the Middle East.

In Syria, Libya and Yemen, autocratic rulers have been able to employ brutal force in continuing attempts to crush revolts because rather than sidelining the military, they have ensured that key units are commanded by members of the ruling family. This has given those well-trained and well-armed units a vested interest in maintaining the status quo and effectively neutralised the risk of potential defections in times of crisis.

As a result, defections from the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni military have not significantly weakened the grip of autocratic rulers and their ability to crack down on anti-government protesters. The defections have strengthened the protesters and rebels but have not significantly altered the balance of power. The exception perhaps is Yemen where an attack by a dissident unit on the presidential compound of President Ali Abdullah Saleh seriously injured him and many of his officials. That assault however was launched only after forces loyal to Saleh attacked the unit's headquarters.

Bahraini, Saudi and Iran models

A fourth model is that of Bahrain where military and security forces crushed a popular revolt. The fact that much of the rank and file consists of foreigners, mostly Pakistanis, explains the regime's ability to employ brutal violence against the mainly Shia protesters in the island-nation of only 1.2 million people.

Finally, there is the Saudi and Iranian model with a variant in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) that has been tested only to a limited degree. Both Saudi Arabia and Iran have built competing military forces; in Iran's case the controversial Revolutionary Guards Corps and in Saudi Arabia the National Guard now commanded by King Abdullah's son, that operate independent of the armed forces. The UAE this year invested over US\$500 million in the creation of a mercenary force, designed to quell civil unrest in the country as well as in the region.

The structure of Middle Eastern military forces suggests that the Arab revolt is likely to be met with repeated violence and bloodshed and potentially civil war in countries with competing military forces. That raises the prospect of a decade of instability and strife in a geo-strategically crucial part of the world.

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