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Middle East and North Africa: Another year of Upheaval

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Political turmoil and violence promise to shape events in the Middle East and North Africa this year. Monarchies are replacing republics in facing the tidal wave of reform demands in the region. Syria continues to be wracked by civil war while post-revolt nations like Egypt struggle to build a more open society.

Commentary

THE PRE-and post-revolt Arab leaders in the Middle East and North Africa face challenges ranging from political uprisings to violent confrontations, with Gulf monarchies replacing republics facing the brunt of the tidal wave of reform demands that have been sweeping across the region the past two years.

In Jordan opposition groups boycotted parliamentary elections in protest against alleged gerrymandering. The boycott follows weeks of intermittent demonstrations that suggested that King Abdullah's room to manoeuvre is closing. The king enjoys a degree of legitimacy that ousted Arab leaders like Hosni Mubarak and Muammar Gaddafi could not claim. That legitimacy was called into question with protesters for the first time shouting 'The people want to topple the regime' and is likely to be further challenged by the election of a parliament that will look little different from the last one.

International community's policy dilemmas

Egypt, in the throes of a convoluted post-revolt transition, is bracing itself for renewed street violence when a Cairo court announces its verdict on January 26 in the case against 73 people, including nine mid-level security officials, accused of responsibility for the death a year ago of 74 soccer fans in a politically charged brawl in the Suez Canal city of Port Said. At issue is the difficulty in reforming institutions, in this case the overpowering and deeply resented police and security forces.

Two years into the uprising-turned-civil war in Syria, there seems no end in sight to the brutal conflict that according to United Nations estimates, has already cost the lives of 60,000 people. There seems little doubt that President Bashar al-Assad will not retain the upper hand eventually. But there is little reason to believe that his downfall will mean an end to violent confrontation and the territorial integrity of post-Assad Syria has been thrown into doubt. Fears of what post-Assad Syria will look like are enhanced by the rise of militant Islamist forces in the armed resistance against the Assad regime as well as the rise of Kurdish nationalism and concern that Assad's Alawite sect may see secession as its survival strategy.

Besides mounting concern about post-Assad Syria, there is a new development in the form of a fatal terrorist attack on a remote gas production facility in the Algerian desert in response to French intervention in neighbouring Mali. A counter-attack by Algerian forces to the take-over of the gas plant left scores of foreign hostages dead. The fact that the rebel advance in north Mali had to be repulsed by French military forces highlight the policy dilemmas confronting the international community posed by the irresistible thrust for greater freedom by ethnic and minority groups across the Sahel region.

Decade of political turmoil and violence

All these bode ill for potential conflict in the oil-rich Gulf states led by Saudi Arabia, where efforts to fend off popular revolts with huge social spending are wearing thin. Gulf monarchies like Jordan (apart from Bahrain's royal family), still maintain a degree of legitimacy but their ability to leverage is being reduced by their failure to address key popular demands that would allow greater political freedom but dilute their absolute power. The outlook for not just another year but a decade is one of volatility, political turmoil and violence in a region that stretches from the Atlantic coast of Africa to the Gulf.

What all these situations have in common is the fact that suppressed populations and ethnic groups increasingly no longer are willing to simply turn the other cheek. They also raise concerns about regional and international policies that in the case of countries like Algeria, Jordan and the Gulf states are tantamount to an ostrich sticking its head in the sand. Leaders seem to be hoping that mounting unrest and discontent can be contained without the introduction of political change and that they can crack down on violent jihadist groups without addressing the underlying issues that provide them a feeding ground.

The West, China and Russia, still stuck in a mould that favours stability over inevitable albeit messy political change, were caught off guard by the popular revolts that toppled the leaders of Egypt, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen and dragged Syria into civil war. They have yet to apply the lessons from these popular revolts to the rest of North Africa and the Middle East.

Addressing popular grievances

Similarly, the lesson of the defeat of Osama Bin Laden's Al Qaeda was that it was as much a result of the Arab populations ignoring the group's call for jihad in favour of people power as the war on terror. Extremist militants in Mali and Algeria, even when they employ the Al Qaeda label, are motivated by local grievances rather than global jihad and capitalise on the failure of governments to address those grievances. Failure to recognise that the solution is addressing popular grievances constitutes as much a threat to long-term stability as allowing those grievances to fester in a key corner of the world. Short-term volatility and instability is inevitable as the regional push for change continues. The international community would be well advised to seriously help post-revolt nations manage transition, steer pre-revolt countries towards managed reform and in the confrontation with jihadists to ensure that military and law enforcement measures are grounded in policies that address underlying grievances.

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