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No. 027/2013 dated 13 February 2013

Post-revolt Arab Transitions: Driven by Distrust and Inexperience

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

Post-revolt Middle Eastern and North African countries are struggling to manage the transition from autocratic to more transparent, accountable societies. Increasingly prejudice, distrust and inexperience are proving to be greater obstacles to a successful transition than resistance of vested interests of former regimes or alleged Islamists.

Commentary

POST-REVOLT Arab nations are experiencing tumultuous times. The assassination of a prominent Tunisian opposition leader has sparked mass protests against Islamists held responsible for his death. Prime Minister Hamadi Jebali has called for the replacement of the Islamist-dominated Cabinet by a government of technocrats that would lead the country to elections, to the chagrin of his Ennahada party that fears loss of power.

Egypt has been wracked by violent street protests that have left more than 60 people dead in three Suez Canal and Red Sea cities, forcing President Mohamed Morsi to declare emergency rule and bring the military back into the streets and soccer stadiums to maintain law and order.

Underlying fault lines

Underlying the volatility in Egypt and Tunisia as well as difficult transitions in Libya and Yemen is the increasing lack of confidence between Islamists and non-Islamist forces. That fault line is fuelled by an ever deeper secularist suspicion that the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists who by and large have emerged from the revolts as the largest, most organised political force, are bent on creating Islamist states and enforcing Islamic law. This mistrust drives the weakening of the civilian and armed opposition to President Bashar Al Assad in the continuing civil war in Syria.

For their part, Islamists, including moderates, are not certain where the allegiances of non-Islamists lie and whether significant segments of the secularists would opt for a less free society in cooperation with institutions like the judiciary, the police and security forces in a bid to halt what they see as an Islamist power grab.

To be sure, the militancy and violence of more radical Islamists in Tunisia in recent months as well as Morsi's imperious style of government, his failed attempt to acquire absolute power, his unilaterally pushing through of

a controversial constitution, his failed attempt to fire a state prosecutor and increased reliance on the despised police and security forces, have done little to assuage anti-Islamist fears.

Similarly, Syrian opposition forces with Islamists in the lead have failed to convince the country's key minorities who could have made a difference in reducing the regime's power base, that there would be a place for them and that their rights would be secured in a post-Assad Syria.

Yet, lost in the mixture of misperception and prejudice is the recognition that Islamists came to power virtually unprepared for government, having a history of a pressured existence either underground, a legal nether land or exile. The Muslim Brotherhood, two years after the overthrow of Mubarak and seven months after Morsi's election as president, remains nominally an illegal organisation in Egypt. As a result, this reinforces a sense that he and the Brotherhood fail to truly understand the concept of democracy and are more focused on fending off threats and settling old scores.

A mental transition

Morsi, like his counterparts in other post-revolt Arab nations, (apart from Libya that suffers the consequences of Muammar Gaddafi's refusal to build institutions), have inherited states dominated by police and security forces and populated by institutions moulded by the former autocratic regimes with their own vested interests. It takes a degree of political savvy, mastering of electoral politics, backroom horse trading, give-and-take and an ability to manage public expectations rather than the bunker mentality in which Islamist leaders operated in the past. With few exceptions, they have yet to demonstrate that they can make that mental transition.

In retrospect, Morsi's deft alliance late last year with the second echelon of Egypt's military command that allowed him to sideline long-serving commanders who unsuccessfully sought to grab power in the period between his election and his assumption of office, seems more an exception than an indication of his ability to manoeuvre the minefield that constitutes Egyptian transition politics.

Jebali's call for an interim technocratic government in a bid to avert a second popular revolt in Tunisia comes closest to Morsi's rare display of political deftness in his handling of the military. It contrasts starkly with Morsi's surprising reluctance to tackle reform of the police and security forces who for many years targeted the Muslim Brotherhood, his seeming willingness to maintain Mubarak-era structures and his increased reliance on them despite the existence of reformists within all of those institutions.

Relative calm has returned to the streets of Egyptian cities, giving Morsi at best a month to build bridges in advance of the country's next flashpoint when a court in Cairo pronounces verdict in the case of the remaining 52 defendants accused of responsibility for the deaths of 74 soccer fans a year ago in a politically-loaded brawl in Port Said.

Flashpoint offers leverage

To do so, Morsi would have to convincingly reach out to his detractors in a bid to convince them that he has put the bunker mentality behind him, wants his government to be inclusive rather than exclusive and that he is serious about reform of key state institutions and is focusing on a turnaround of the country's economy.

As much as the Port Said case constitutes a flash point – the court's sentencing last month of the first batch of 21 defendants to death sparked the most violent protests – it also gives Morsi leverage. In the absence of a justification of the court's ruling, a leaked summary of the prosecution's case put the blame for the brawl as much on the police as it did on spectators in the stadium.

The prosecutor's case, coupled with human rights reports that document that the police and security forces are a law unto themselves, provide Morsi with the ammunition to start the difficult process of reforming law enforcement. It is a move that would prove immensely popular and would help restore political calm needed to embark on a road of economic recovery.

A convincing move to amend the constitution in ways that removes fears of an Islamist takeover would further serve to bridge the widening gap in Egyptian politics. It is too early to write Morsi off as a failed leader. The ball is in his court, though time is running out.

James M. Dorsey is Senior Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, co-director of the University of Wuerzburg's Institute for Fan Culture, and the author of The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer blog.