NORTH AFRICA, WEST ASIA

The poverty of protest

Until the opposition is able to mature and offer a cohesive alternative, the old regimes will remain in power.

Maged Mandour

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Algerian protesters shout slogans calling for radical change of the system and rejecting the 12 December

T he Italian Marxist, Antoni Gramsci, in his magnum opus the "The Prison Notebooks" defined a crisis as consisting "precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born". This is, indeed, the case in the Arab world, where the second wave of the so-called "Arab Spring", is facing similar challenges as the first wave that washed over the region at the end of 2010. This is with the notable exception of Sudan - keeping in mind that it is too early to call Sudan a success story.

In Iraq, the popular protests against corruption and worsening public services is taking a deadly turn, with increasing violence meted out by the security forces against the protestors. This has led to the death of at least 350 people so far, with 40 dead in 24 hours. An ominous sign for a country that has struggled with decades of civil strife.

In Algeria, which is ignored by the international media, protests have been ongoing since February to demand the postponement of the presidential election, and the complete overthrow of the regime, not just its figurehead. In Lebanon, the protests that erupted after the government attempted to impose a new tax on Whatsapp calls, are still ongoing. They morphed into a protest against the sectarian system that has plagued the country for decades. The demands of the protestors are strictly legal and constitutional, as they demand the instilling of a technocratic government, followed by early elections. However, the spectre of sectarianism is never at bay in the country. Even though the protestors have been successful in avoiding falling into the sectarian trap, there are incidents of protest being attacked by member of Hezbollah and Amal.

Even though there are encouraging signs that the protestors have learned from the first wave of protests, most notably from the Egyptian and Syrian

experiences, the same structural issues that faced the first wave, remain. For example, in Sudan and Algeria, the protestors learned that the fall of the head of the regime, does not mean that the goal of the movement has been achieved. On the contrary, it is a chance for the regime to re-group and consolidate its position. This happened, clearly in Sudan, where the military attempted to supress the protests, after the fall of Bashir, borrowing a page from its Egyptian cousin to the North.

Having said that, the same structural problems that the first wave of protest faced remain manifest. Indeed, the post-modern nature of the protests that was the main characteristic of the first wave remain prominent, which will create the same problems and lead to similar outcomes of repression, violence, and consolidation of the old regimes, albeit in adapted, more brutal forms. Post-modern in this case refers to the lack of an overarching ideological framework and goal, besides tactical goals of improving living standards and the liberalization of the political system.

The first common feature across the region is that all these protest movements are not seeking power, either through election or through revolutionary means. In other words, questions of taking over the apparatus of the state, and using it to achieve the goals of the protest movement do not feature in the discourse. This will place the protestors in the same dilemma that the Egyptians faced in being unable to transform their protests into concrete actions, policies, and vision. It will also allow the old regime to consolidate itself, and remain in power, through legitimate elections. Concrete changes in this case, would be limited. For example, if new elections are held in Lebanon, under the current system, most probably, the same faces will return to power, and the sectarian system will remain intact.

Another issue that is facing these protest movements is the lack of ideological maturity and coherence, indeed, their broad based and spontaneous nature. Historically, movements for broad social changes are preceded with an

ideological struggle in the realm of civil society that does not only deconstruct the existing hegemonic paradigm, but also offers a cohesive alternative to the existing order.

In Iran, the work of intellectuals like Ali Shariati laid down the foundation for the revolution of 1979, in France the works of Voltaire and Rousseau did the same for the revolution of 1789. In the United States, the civil rights movement was preceded by the long struggle of intellectuals like W. E. B. Du Bois, and the black power movement was inspired by the teachings of Malcolm X. This ideological struggle allowed these movements to create a cohesive core, which in turn created the conditions for an ability to withstand repression and to create a sustained assault on the existing order.

On the other hand, the Arab protest movements were not proceeded by a prolonged ideological struggle; as such, there is a lack of coherence and direction. Even though this non-ideological nature allows the protest movement to create broad a based coalition to achieve tactical goals, it has a clear weakness once those unifying goals are achieved. Namely, the disintegration of the coalition and complete inability to develop the movement beyond its initial rejectionist nature. This is combined with the lack of traditional party structure, which makes it much more difficult to contest/cease power. In essence, the flat, fluid, and non-ideological nature makes for an excellent protest movement, but it is unable to move it beyond the initial phase of the protest and rejection of the existing order.

Finally, similar to the first wave of protest, there is a separation between the economic and political spheres, what the Marxist would call the structure and the super structure. In other words, even though some of the demands of the protestors are economic and connected to public policy, like issues of inflation, poverty, public services, and corruption, there is limited understanding of social relations that govern their material lives. For example, there is restricted comprehension of the nature of crony and rentier capitalism that is the

dominant form of production in the Arab world, the role of the military establishment in some countries, like Egypt, in deforming capital formation. This narrows the demands of the protest movement to the realm of the political, without making deep structural economic and social changes to their countries. As such, if the protest movements are successful, this success is limited to the realm of procedural democracy, rather than fundamental democratic changes in the structure on which this political system is built.

In essence, based on the Gramscian definition of crisis, Arab societies are going through a deep crisis. The old ruling systems are no longer viable, however, due to the weakness of the social forces opposing them they are able to linger on. In countries like Iraq and Lebanon, the sectarian systems have failed to provide the public benefits that justified their existence and relative security and lack of civil strife, like the case of Lebanon, is not a sufficient raison d'être. The collapse of the old regimes' ideological hegemony was not replaced by a counter-hegemony of the protest movement.

The old regimes can only survive through a combination of coercion, co-option, and international support, which is not sustainable in the long-term. However, until the opposition is able to mature and offer a cohesive alternative, the old regimes will remain in power. Having said that, it is worth quoting Alexis de Tocqueville, when he was addressing the French Chamber of Deputies on the eve of the revolution of 1848: "This, gentlemen, is my profound conviction: I believe that we are at this moment sleeping on a volcano." This sentence could serve as warning to the ancient regimes of the Arab World!

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