

Dignity, Democracies & Dynasties – in the wake of the revolt on the Arab street

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In 2009 CEPS published our book about democracy in the European neighbourhood with the subtitle “Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties”.¹ Although the geographic fit was not perfect, broadly speaking the East Europeans were struggling with their democratic transitions while the Arab world and Central Asia were experiencing the consolidation or even proliferation of dynasties. These dynasties could be graded into several categories: the formal royal monarchies (Jordan, Morocco, Arabian Gulf), the father-to-son successions (Azerbaijan, Syria), the presidents whose sons were being groomed for succession (Egypt, Libya), the presidents without effective term limits (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan) and finally the case where the spirit if not the letter of the constitution was manipulated to a similar end (the Putin-Medvedev tango in Russia). Authoritarian leaders worldwide appeared increasingly self-confident, led by China, which sent out its huge message that a one-party state could deliver economic progress faster than various weak or stumbling so-called democracies. Western democracy promotion was on the defensive. It was either giving way to the priorities of the post-9/11 security agenda, or suffering from its abuse by President Bush to justify the disastrous military invasion of Iraq.

Tunisia and now Egypt have turned the tables on the authoritarians. Their colour revolutions are reverberating not only around the Arab world but the entire globe, even before Mubarak has departed, or the shape of the post-Ben Ali regime becomes clear in Tunisia.

A new word is introduced on the Arab street: ‘dignity’, preferred to, it seems – or at least accompanying – democracy. For democracy has all too often become a debased currency, and it sounds very Western. Dignity is the Arab choice, but we all want our democracies to be dignified, and we can think of some in Europe that are not. At least the time has come at last when the whole of Europe and its wider European neighbourhood can openly discuss democracy, and indeed dignified democracy, on the same terms. Gone now, hopefully, is the time when officials of the EU and its member states were not allowed to pronounce the word democracy in the Southern neighbourhood, but instead had to speak through euphemisms such as ‘good governance’.

The new dynasties under preparation have been instantly discredited. Ben Ali and his notorious wife are out. Mubarak may not yet be out, but his son is no longer a candidate to succeed his papa. Same story in Yemen, where President Saleh says now he will not stand again after 33 years in office, nor

¹ Michael Emerson and Richard Youngs (ed.), *Democracies Plight in the European Neighbourhood – Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties*, CEPS, 2009.

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will his son stand for election. In Kazakhstan, Nazabayev was preparing for a plebiscite to try and legitimize his presidency for life, but he has quickly judged this timing to be inopportune. The royal monarchies in Jordan and Morocco seem not to be threatened, but they feel pressure to move faster towards becoming constitutional monarchies. The King of Jordan replaced his prime minister fast, but the street is saying that parliament should make this appointment.

If in 2012 Putin becomes President of Russia again, and his dynastic tango with Medvedev goes on, this will be without dignity. Medvedev declared at Davos last week: "What happened in Tunisia, I think, is quite a substantial lesson for any authorities. When the authorities don't catch up with the development of society, don't meet the aspirations of the people, the outcome is very sad." Sad indeed, or worse. Still Putin's line is that the two of them will make known in due course their agreement on who will stand next, which is entirely disrespectful towards the Russian people. Perhaps they should both stand as candidates, offering the people a carefully managed but still real choice between their somewhat different political ideologies.

And then there is the reaction from China, which understandably sees in Cairo's Tahrir Square disturbing comparisons with its Tiananmen Square of 1989, when around 2,000 people were killed by the army in order to quash the uprising. Indeed the most sinister scenario for resolution in Tahrir Square is that it becomes another Tiananmen Square. Beijing's precautionary response has been to clamp down on the news. The people must know as little as possible about this. But this is unsustainable. The last year has seen China emerging as the new global superpower, with an export machine and official financing that have become central mechanisms of the new globalisation. Its business schools and academic achievements climb to the top of world ranks. And then it tries to cut out the news from Egypt that is sweeping across the whole world. China's authoritarianism suddenly finds itself more on the defensive.

But what next after the heady days of revolutionary euphoria in Tunis and Cairo? The world's greatest experts on Egypt, including those in Tahrir Square as well as the academics, are unanimous in having no idea what happens next, beyond discussing a wide array of scenarios. The Egyptian revolution is still leaderless, with no agenda except 'Mubarak out'. Now is that poignant moment of total uncertainty over the future, except for the certainty that the status quo cannot last much longer.

The history book of revolutions and *coups d'état* has models to ponder upon. The French revolution of 1789 and the Russian revolution of 1917 both saw short initial post-revolutionary periods when relatively moderate people were trying to gain control, before the radicals took over. The multiple 1848 revolutions in Europe spread with contagion, as again in 1989-91 and in lesser degrees also in the colour revolutions of the mid-2000s, and now across the Arab world; but 1848 saw authoritarianism reassert itself quite quickly for some decades, while 1989-91 was a resounding success, but the colour revolutions of the mid-2000s fared less well.

Who will fill the power vacuum in Egypt now? Mohamed El Baradei is one candidate, representing mainstream democracy. But he seems not to develop any bandwagon momentum. At this stage in the colour revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia, Yushchenko, Timoshenko and Saakashvili were already the leaders of the street. The army is the next candidate, and already a plausible one. Its role as power broker has a long pedigree, in Egypt itself, and prominently also in nearby Algeria and Turkey in not-so-distant decades of the last century. Its role in Egypt (but not in Tunisia) is already crucial. Islam is a further candidate, and here there are two options. A first one is the radical Iranian Islamic revolution: the Shah fled in January 1979 after a year of street demonstrations and conflict, but then the Ayatollah Khomeini returned as leader within two weeks, followed within three months by the referendum that introduced the Islamic republic. A second one would see a moderate and democratic Muslim Brotherhood acceding to power alone or in a coalition, following more in the footsteps of the Turkish AKP party.

There are only sobering lessons on offer from the colour revolutions of the mid-2000s. Ukraine's Orange revolution became a sad spectacle. Its foundations in a vibrant civil society were real. It foundered on irreconcilable competition and disagreement between its two leaders, Yushchenko and Timoshenko, which led to dysfunctional chaos between the institutions of democratic governance, compounded by failure to do anything about endemic corruption. It is replaced now by a regime that reverts towards authoritarianism and seems even more corrupt if that is possible. Georgia's Rose revolution saw its champion Saakashvili push through economic reform and an impressive de-

corruption policy, although he has hardly been a model democrat. Kyrgyzstan's Tulip revolution saw one corrupt autocratic clan replaced by another one, until last year when Rosa Otunbayeva has struggled to do better. To say the very least, these colour revolutions did not switch into instant democracy.

Over the last several decades newly acceding member states of the European Union did better in their revolutions, throwing out the colonels (Greece in 1974), or fascists (Portugal in 1974, Spain in 1975), or communists (the whole 1989-91 brigade). All these revolutions rapidly led on to applications to join the EU, which anchored the new democratic practice, and in addition most of these countries had a certain earlier democratic history. However in South-East Europe, the democratic model has been often deeply flawed by 'state capture', namely the ability of democratically elected leaderships to appropriate for their parties or cronies large shares of the state's economic assets. Somehow the electoral processes could not stop this, with democracy degenerating into switches between different leadership groups, each manipulating the rent from state assets. This manipulation of state assets to reward and preserve ruling elites is also rife in the Arab world. But only in the oil rich states could this extend to rewarding the entire population. For the others, including Tunisia and Egypt, the rewards could not go that far. However the new leaderships of Tunisia and Egypt will surely still be subject to these same temptations, which would mean dysfunctional or perverted democracy.

The street revolutions are exhilarating and inspiring. But our short review of revolutionary experiences suggest several categorically different models and sequences for what may come next in Egypt; the only bet is that the transition to democracy is a long haul and not a straight path:

- A/ Transition towards mainstream democracy. Maybe the September elections will be free and fair, and move on along the lines of standard modern democracy; but maybe the victors will turn to C or D.
- B/ The army takes charge. But this could see as B.1 a benign role in serving as custodian of order, facilitating the September elections, thus moving on to A: or it could become B.2, facilitating the rise of a new strong state regime, which might then evolve into D; or more simply develop into B.3, with rule by the generals, until there is another uprising.
- C/ Political Islam takes charge. But this could be either C.1, where the Muslim Brotherhood becomes the largest political party, forms a government, but does it Turkish AKP-style or in coalition with secular parties, thus reverting to A; or C.2 with radical Islam seizing power and establishing an Islamic republic (a scenario considered unlikely, except in Israeli think tanks).
- D/ Dysfunctional democracy takes charge, with corrupt 'state capture' of economic assets rife, which state of affairs lasts for some years or decades, before reformist pressures obtain a reversion to A.

For the time being, some hybrid blend seems to appear: the army keeping the peace without taking sides, the Muslim Brotherhood having now accepted to enter into political dialogue, with elections programmed for September; but what will come to dominate (as between A, B, C, or D, of their sub-scenarios) remains totally uncertain.

The European experience clearly divides between those countries that were able successfully to anchor their democratic revolutions through the EU accession process, and the colour revolutions of Eastern Europe which had no such anchor and have seen disappointing results. Successful democracy relies on a standard institutional structure with checks and balances between the triad executive-legislature-judiciary, coupled with deep political culture and civil society – rather than arriving as if by parachute with instant results from fresh, free and fair elections. In Western Europe this took centuries to develop. But one should not exaggerate. History has surely been accelerating, and also Western conception of democracy is not really Western any more. Of G20 members only three are not democracies – China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and all three are now on the back foot politically. All the rest are functioning democracies. Aside from the old European and Anglo-Saxon democracies, they include Argentina, Brazil, Chile, India, Indonesia, Japan, Mexico, Turkey, South Africa and South Korea. If the Arab world now tends begins to move towards dignified democracy (rather than theocracy), it would mean that all continents of the world have major if not predominant constituencies favouring democracy as the leading paradigm or normative reference. Only China stands out as the single major exception, but this may become an increasingly lonely position politically, even while it makes massive advances economically.