

The Arab Regatta – a half year report card

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1 July 2011

The Arab spring of 2011 is now an undisputed historical fact, embracing 17 Arab states all the way from Morocco to Yemen, and possibly more beyond. But no-one seems able to say where it is heading. Ideal outcomes can be dreamed of. But what could really happen in the months and years to come?

One can recall the regatta metaphor, used in the 1990s to follow the progress of Central and Eastern Europe in their post-communist transitions into the European Union. In the Arab regatta now underway, every one of the Arab states has been shaken by the Arab spring. All are entering uncharted political waters. But where could these vessels now go, with many hazards ahead – a multiplicity of Scyllas and Charibdises? The box below outlines a schema of regime types and conceivable regime dynamics that can be drawn up on the basis of what has already transpired in the Arab spring, and what other world regions have experienced in their regimes' transitions.

Regime typology for monitoring the Arab regatta

1. Status quo maintained, e.g. with aid of subsidies to buy acquiescence, maybe leading later to 2 or 3
2. Progressive constitutional reform
3. Uprising against the regime, leading to ...
 - a. Moderate protests, no regime overthrow, possibly then move to 1 or 2
 - b. Violent repression, no regime overthrow, possibly then move to 1 or 2
 - c. Civil war, tribal or sectarian conflict: either regime survives (=3.b), or is overthrown (=3.d)
 - d. Regime change, with:
 - i. Power vacuum
 - ii. Clean break with new democratic constitution
 - iii. Renewed corrupt authoritarianism
 - iv. Military regime
 - v. Radical Islamist state
 - vi. Failed state
 - vii. Protectorate regime with external presence

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Category 1 sees Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar and the Emirates managing to sustain the status quo, although Saudi Arabia remains much more conservative than the smaller Gulf states. Their main response so far to the Arab spring has been to distribute oil manna to keep the people content with the status quo.

Category 2 sees Morocco, Jordan and Oman undertaking or pledging political reform in the direction of constitutionalisation of their monarchies, for which the European history books provide numerous examples, but which took decades or centuries to mature. However it is not at all clear how far the reforms pledged by these states will be implemented. They may well be watching what happens next in Tunisia and Egypt before deciding what to do.

Saudi Arabia is pushing the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to invite Morocco and Jordan to associate with them in some way or become members, perhaps to enhance their monarchy's legitimacy and identify a credible model for political reform (Category 1 associating with Category 2). Yet it seems doubtful whether this initiative will really develop.

Category 3 is about uprisings seeking regime overthrow, but here scenarios expand in number and explode in degrees of difference.

Tunisia and Egypt have seen their impressively non-violent uprisings succeed in a first step of regime change (3.d), but leading to what? For the moment Tunisia sees a fragile power vacuum (d.i), alongside preparations for elections in October to a special assembly to adopt a new democratic constitution, with regular elections to follow thereafter (d.ii). The main political parties competing for power are socialists and Islamists.

Egypt is also preparing constitutional reform, and for a presidential election in October (d.ii), but under the management of the military, which might develop into a military regime (d.iv), while the Muslim Brotherhood seems so far to be the strongest party preparing for the elections.

Islamists in both Tunisia and Egypt can see the relevance of the Turkish model with its democratic Islamist AK party now convincingly re-elected. However the role of the military in Turkey as overarching political controller a few decades ago stands for an earlier vintage Turkish model that will also resonate in Egypt, but not Tunisia.

Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain on the other hand have seen the Arab spring turn murderously bloody, with violent repression causing hundreds or thousands of deaths.

Libya sees a still unresolved combination of violent repression (3.b), civil war (3.c) and external military intervention by NATO, mandated by the UN Security Council to protect civilians, but obviously escalated with the aim to collapse the Khadafi regime. This military action should end soon, which might conceivably lead to an external peace-keeping presence in the event of Khadafi's demise (d.vii), Bosnia /Kosovo style. This external intervention under the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) doctrine will become in any case a landmark case study in international relations norms, whether it becomes a success or failure.

Yemen saw violent repression first (3.b), becoming then more of a civil war (3.c), leading to at least a partial regime overthrow with the departure of the wounded President Saleh for Saudi Arabia, and now an apparent power vacuum (d.i). At the time of writing all options seem open for the period ahead, ranging in the best case to reconciliation of the warring tribes and a new constitution (d.ii), through to the uncontrolled Al Qaida presence signaling more of a failed state (d.vi).

Syria is now in the midst of a tragic mix of violent repression (3.b) getting close to civil war (3.c), with all options open as to what comes next. Sectarian conflict is highly possible.

Bahrain saw an episode of violent repression (3.b) with military intervention from Saudi Arabia, but may now get onto a constitutional reform path (2). Sectarian conflict is also here highly possible.

Algeria has seen only moderate protests (3.a), given its terrible experience of civil war in recent decades. Lebanon similarly has the memories of civil war as a restraint, but sectarian violence is constantly simmering. Also Iraq has seen so much violence in recent years that this may explain the relatively subdued reactions so far to the Arab spring. But both Iraq and Lebanon are exposed to whatever happens next in Syria.

The Palestinian territories are *sui generis*, with attempts to form a new unity government between Fatah and Hamas ongoing at the time of writing. One impact of the Arab spring has been to bring demands for Palestinian statehood to the fore, with plans to seek recognition at the UN in the autumn. Already the regional context changes, with Egypt opening its border with Gaza. Syrian youths have tested the frontier with Israel on the Golan Heights, presumably with official encouragement to distract from internal problems.

Scenarios for the possible emergence of a radical Islamist state (d.v), or of relapse after regime change back into renewed authoritarianism (d.iii) cannot be excluded, but it would be premature to signal such scenarios for any particular case.

The challenge now for all interested parties is to try to understand what evolution, or zigzag sequence, of regime types may lie ahead. The experiences of Latin America and South East Asia offer many narratives for nascent democracies, with many instances of uprisings and regime overthrow leading to sequences of would-be democratic regimes, military regimes, and renewed authoritarianism. These episodes have often lasted decades before finally giving way to sustainable democracy, as for example in the major cases of Brazil and Indonesia. In other cases regime instability between civilian and military rule may persist, as currently in Thailand. The recent experiences of former Soviet Union states have seen the immediate post-communist regimes revert to absolute authoritarianism in Central Asia, semi-authoritarianism in Russia. Eastern Europe offers a sobering range of regimes between the authoritarian Belarus and Azerbaijan to the disappointing sequels to the colour revolutions of Ukraine and Georgia of the mid-2000s.

For the time being, the summary scorecard for the 17 Arab states is as follows:

- 4 seek to sustain the status quo.
- 3 seek moderate political reform.
- 2 have achieved regime change and seek a clean constitutional break
- 4 have degenerated into violent repression or civil war, 2 of which have provoked external military intervention.
- 3 are fragile but relatively quiet after moderate protests.
- 1 pushes for statehood.

This is a simplified benchmarking, which at least may serve as a basis for an update in another six months time, and as an aide in trying to get a sense of the political dynamics at work. It is another huge political transition story, approaching in importance that which erupted in Central and Eastern Europe two decades ago, comparable certainly in the power of cross-border revolutionary contagion, while of course very different for the historical and cultural context; yet at the same time so many of the mechanisms of corrupt authoritarianism are more universal than regional. To return to the regatta imagery, all vessels are on the high seas, yet their next ports of call seem to be mostly shrouded in fog.