

UPHEAVAL IN THE MIDDLE EAST

WHAT COMES NEXT AFTER THE EVENTS IN TUNISIA AND EGYPT?

Michael A. Lange

Over the last few weeks the world has been watching the Arab nations with great interest and a certain degree of admiration, closely following media coverage as the sensational events have unfolded. For political observers who thought they knew these countries from past experience, these events have been both surprising and worrying.

The people of these Arab states who have been oppressed and bullied for so long are rising up against the arbitrary despotism of their rulers, rebelling against their paternalism and wilful disregard for the views of their citizens. They are demanding to be heard and to be shown respect. They want to be involved in decisions about their future and will no longer allow themselves to be fobbed off with empty promises: "We want democracy – now!"

UPHEAVAL IN TUNISIA

Mohamed Bouazizi, a young IT graduate from the small town of Sidi Bouzid in southern Tunisia discovered it was impossible to find a suitable job, despite his qualifications and travelling to the country's capital to seek work. He swallowed his pride and returned to his home town, where he tried to earn a crust in an honest, but less academic, fashion.

He tried to make a living selling vegetables on the street. The town's authorities treated this "rogue" academic with suspicion and refused to issue him with a street vendor's licence, partly because he could not or would not pay the necessary bribes. When he continued trading regardless, the police locked him up, confiscated his donkey cart and



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vegetables, beat him for not having the cash to pay them off and then let him go again.

The young graduate felt deeply humiliated. After this procedure had been repeated several times, in his despair and shame he saw suicide as his only way out. He doused himself in petrol and tried to kill himself, but he initially survived the attempt. The country's President, Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, was so shocked by this terrible act that he hastened to the desperate victim's hospital bed to express his sympathy as telegenically as possible. But it was too late; the symbolic handshake was not enough to save either the desperate "victim" or the worried "perpetrator". On January 4 Mohammed Bouaziz died of his injuries.

In 1987, Prime Minister Ben Ali had seized power in Tunisia. With the support of the army and police, he forced Habib Boughiba, to take retirement.

Almost 25 years earlier, on a peaceful November morning in 1987, Prime Minister Ben Ali had seized power in Tunisia. With the support of the army and police, and without bloodshed, his "medical coup" forced his long-time patron and founder of the Republic, Habib Boughiba, to take retirement "on medical grounds" due to his encroaching senility. The Tunisian people welcomed the end of a long period of economic stagnation and political procrastination. The new president immediately created a new political alliance, the Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique (RCD), which tried to break new ground and attracted many committed young people. The aging governmental elite of the Bourghiba era was removed. A new official party committed to the new president gave him the party political support he needed.

The events in neighbouring Algeria after electoral victory by the Islamists and the resulting civil war helped the new president to win the support of the majority of his people for the subsequent massive persecution of Islamists in Tunisia. Islamist leader Rachid Ghannouchi ended up being isolated and forced to flee into exile in London.

The president also dissolved the association between Tunisia and the PLO and distanced himself from the pan-Arab dream and the Palestinian conflict. This meant he could now count on increased western cooperation in

the political and economic sphere. With its new internal stability and foreign policy positioning, Tunisia could now concentrate on opening up the economy, encouraging small and medium-sized businesses and tourism. The economy grew in the shadow of a police-controlled state.

The president then married a daughter of the well-known Trabelsi clan, one of the biggest and most economically powerful families in Tunisia, though their operating methods were highly controversial. Under the president's protection the family became even more brazen, bending the law to suit themselves. The Trabelsi clan or the president's family had their fingers in every large company or profitable concession. Even Tunisian entrepreneurs who had previously been close to the president now found themselves suffering under rather than profiting from his presidency. They saw their profits disappearing due to the forced shareholdings of the Trabelsi clan, and they increasingly began to refuse to pay the regime's "protection money". They stopped investing in their own country, turned their faces towards Europe and gradually drained the country of urgently-needed investment capital. Once Tunisia's economy was hit by the economic and financial crisis, and there were fewer and fewer jobs available for the growing number of highly-qualified college graduates, the resurgence in confidence among the Tunisian population was replaced by mounting frustration.

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Finally the young student's suicide rocked the country and this latent discontent manifested itself in attacks on police stations, first in rural areas and then in the capital. People's displeasure with the dehumanizing actions of the (police) authorities could no longer be controlled and it spilled over into protests. These were even joined by the urban middle classes, who nurtured the simmering unrest in the capital with the support of large numbers of their discontented compatriots who flooded into Tunis from the country's rural areas. The presidential clan panicked and tried to mobilise the loyal state police and security services to get a grip on the situation. But when this proved unsuccessful and the army refused to fire on the people, the game was up.

The president fought back only briefly, then fled the country like a common thief. However, he still managed to appropriate the central bank's gold reserves with the help of his wife. He headed for France first of all, thinking this was a friendly country, but soon had to learn the hard lesson that a fleeing head of state soon becomes an ostracized head of state, even in a country which had such close historical ties.

UPHEAVAL IN EGYPT

Khalid Said, a young Egyptian student, loved the new world of the internet, social networking and all the new ways he could get in contact with like-minded people to debate the latest issues, including politics. But his network did not only consist of like-minded people. It included the well-equipped and highly-educated Egyptian secret service, who felt they had to keep an eye on this much-trumpeted internet freedom and who were prepared to intervene when it came to politics. The controls were originally aimed at watching over the Islamists and their protagonists, who were surprisingly proficient in the area of technology. But the secret service ended up having total control over the internet, using it for such things as ferreting out gays and student activists.

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This young student also became an activist. He became a blogger, soon attracting attention in the Egyptian blogger community, and – unfortunately – further afield. The security services gave him the usual warning to keep his activities within the limits tolerated by the state. When he defied this warning the police repeatedly arrested him, and finally beat him so badly that he died of his injuries. When the blogger community and then students in general heard this news, their resentment grew, as did their desire to protest. Then they heard the news from Tunis.

Almost thirty years earlier, after the assassination of President Anwar As Sadat in October 1981, Hosni Mubarak took over power in Egypt, a constitutional act as he was Vice-President at the time. In light of rumours that Sadat had chosen his former air force chief to hold this important office because he thought he did not have the charisma

to be a serious rival, many people thought he was just an interim president.

On the heels of this assassination by radical Islamists, Mubarak concentrated first of all on consolidating the domestic political situation. With the support of the military, he weeded out the Islamists who had obviously infiltrated the lower commissioned and non-commissioned ranks of the army. Since then the armed forces have been made up of professional soldiers who are loyal to the regime. He also created a political powerbase in the form of a new political alliance, the National Democratic Party (NDP). He made it the official party of government, thus calling a halt to the tactical party political games played by his predecessor.

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After successfully achieving domestic stability, Mubarak then turned his attention to the rehabilitation of Egypt in the eyes of the world. The country had lost its seat in the Arab League and the support of the majority of Arab states after the Camp David Peace Accords. Mubarak managed to uphold the essence of the Accords and even made them “acceptable” to the Arab League upon Egypt’s return to the fold.

This proof of his steadfastness and reliability makes him the West’s most trusted ally in the Middle East in terms of foreign and security policy. As a tireless, though of late not particularly successful, mediator in the Middle East conflict, if nothing else he benefited from the financial support of his western allies and the willingness of foreign investors to put money into his country. He succeeded in opening up Egypt’s economy by making it possible for local entrepreneurs to become involved in his party, even allowing them to join high-level committees, which up to then had been dominated by the old guard from the army and civil service.

However, in recent years this balance of power has been increasingly overshadowed by the unresolved question of who would be his successor. The Egyptian president still seemed to have good reasons to continue to shoulder the burden of office, despite ever-growing discontent and

increasing repressiveness on the part of the security forces. Over the last few months there has been much debate about whether Mubarak should stand again, but his critics seem to have no clear or uniform idea of who could stand in his place. Any potential candidates have spent too many years standing in the president's shadow, and have not managed to carve out their own individual identity. A dynastic successor in the form of a transfer of political power to Mubarak's son Gamal was vehemently rejected by the largely republican-leaning military.

So once again it was a case of "wait and see". The ability of the regime to map out policies which looked to the future and set in motion clear reforms was fading with every month that the ailing president remained in power. And the governing party failed to send out the right signals at the right time by gathering a group of younger politicians around Gamal Mubarak who would have actually been able to take over many executive functions.

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So in the end the outcome seemed inevitable. The events in Tunis provided the youth of Cairo with the hope that change was possible, and the case of Bouazizi brought back memories of the Egyptian blogger who had been killed in police custody. Revolution was in the air and people were carried away by the power of the moment, overcoming their fear, defying the curfew and demanding change.

THE NORTH AFRICAN BREAK-UP

Egypt and Tunisia have been the most stable countries in North Africa, with both having only a small number of presidents over the last 50 years: two in Tunisia (Bourghiba, Ben Ali) and three in Egypt (Nasser, Sadat, Mubarak). If we take a look at the latest events and developments in these two countries we can see many similarities, but also clear differences, in the underlying causes of these recent events.

In both countries, the new presidents had to take immediate steps to stabilise a domestic situation which was in crisis. In Tunisia the government was in danger of becoming

unduly involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict because of personal sympathies on the part of members of the president's family. This led to radical Islamists threatening to destabilise Tunisia, spurred on and supported by the events in Algeria. In Egypt, after the Islamist motivated assassination, the secular state had to defend its core and the country had to find its way back to the family of Arab nations. It was a real achievement to manage this without turning away from the West or going back on economic and political "openings" such as Infitah or the peace process. These countries continued their programme of economic liberalisation which brought a degree of prosperity, though not for everyone. In Tunisia a growing middle class took root, while in Egypt too few people shared in the prosperity to have a long-term stabilising effect on the country's political situation.

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The presidents' two monolithic alliances, the RCD and NDP, also contributed to the fact that there was no real room for competing parties, because of their exclusivity and close ties to the president. Indeed, there were times when the illusion of party politics had to be created. Even vague hopes of achieving political change through democratically-run parties were destined to be disappointed.

The two countries followed a similar course in the way the people were increasingly subjected to repressive measures. They both declared a state of emergency at the time of the transfer of power, which they subsequently never lifted. Repression not only increased, but control of their citizens infiltrated almost every area of everyday life thanks to new tools such as the internet and mobile phones. Nothing remained hidden from the security services: the "transparent citizen" inescapably became the target of intimidation and reprisals as soon as he did anything which caused ripples in ruling circles.

Young people in Arab states were starting to come of age, largely thanks to the globalisation of the media. Their sense of frustration mounted, along with their protests that they were being robbed of their basic human rights and freedoms. Their barely-controlled anger was soon to spill over. To make a cycling analogy, it is a sign of the

excess pressure which has been building up amongst the youth of the two societies that it only took a tiny hole in the inner tyre for the whole tyre to go flat. There is no chance of riding the bike home on a soft tyre – the tyre is flat and urgently needs to be repaired. A patch is no good; it needs a whole new inner.

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The different political constellations in the two countries now have to deal with current events. Both presidents and even their security forces were taken by surprise by the outcry, but they were not the only ones. None of the opposition parties were prepared for it, and even the generally well-organized and well-informed Muslim Brotherhood were late to jump on the demonstrators' bandwagon.

So former fighter pilot Hosni Mubarak will not be sneaking off like his Tunisian counterpart Ben Ali. He still is much more widely accepted by the majority of the Egyptian population (though not by the demonstrators in Tahrir Square) than the flown Tunisian president. But both of them have already missed their chance to hand over power with dignity, something which Mubarak certainly deserves more than Ben Ali. The Egyptian president relies mainly on his armed forces, while Ben Ali draws on the support of the (secret) police. In both countries, the army is generally well-thought-of, while the police have a dreadful reputation.

In Tunisia it was not just the young unemployed who wanted to get rid of the president. They were joined in large numbers by the middle classes who had been battered by the corruption of the presidential family and the economic and financial crisis. In Egypt the protest is mainly being led by angry young people, with the army and huge state bureaucracy (for the time being) standing on the sidelines. They have too much to lose if not only the president but also the whole regime is forced to stand down. So let us now take a look at some possible scenarios for future political developments in these two countries.

TUNISIA'S FUTURE SCENARIO

Politics

The understandable attempt by the remaining government members to hang on to power as the "interim government" was destined for failure. The fact that the president had directly and largely voluntarily escaped being sentenced by the people meant that the Tunisian demonstrators were looking for other victims of the revolts. It is true that the RCD party headquarters in Tunis was not damaged as badly as the NDP's building in Cairo, but the protesters called for ministers in league with the RCD and other political officials to also be "punished". Leaving the party was no solution, as politicians remained "contaminated" by their closeness to the regime. In the end the prime minister was allowed to lead the government on an interim basis, only because he agreed that his role and function were temporary and that he would not stand for public office.

New political beliefs need time and space to reformulate themselves. Time is also needed to create the constitutional basis for different selection and election procedures.

At the moment constitutional requirements are largely being followed in Tunisia, even though most of them originated under Ben Ali. So far there are not enough political parties with close ties to the people to build a true parliamentary democracy. An urgent reorganisation of the (pre-) political arena is needed before new parliamentary and presidential elections are held. Unions and professional associations also need to reinvent themselves, as they are necessary for the state but have in the past been too close to the government. In any case, new political beliefs need time and space to reformulate themselves.

Time is also needed to create the constitutional basis for different selection and election procedures and to agree on how to make them the basis of a new political direction. It now has to be decided how to do this, whether by the elected parliament, which is now discredited, by a constitutional convention of "elders" or by a round table of all the political parties. In many, though not all, respects, the situation in Tunisia can be compared to the break-up of the GDR.

Economy

Along with the restructuring of political players and entities it is also necessary to make use of the country's quickly-restored stability to get the economy back on track. Fortunately the tourist resorts have not suffered too much damage at the hands of the demonstrators. And the medium-sized contract manufacturers also seem to have largely survived the protests without too much harm.

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So the signs are good that the country will soon regain its former economic strength, though it will not necessarily be in a position to immediately remedy all its socio-economic deficits. The removal of presidential corruption will certainly be an important factor in motivating Tunisian businesspeople to start investing in Tunisia again rather than predominantly abroad. This kind of "patriotic" attitude will help to speed up the process of economic recovery and make the change process more focused and rigorous.

Society

The fact that the revolts in Tunisia were caused by the despairing act of a frustrated IT graduate is symptomatic of the economic and particularly the demographic challenges which are currently facing the Arab world. When 50 per cent of the population of the Arab nations is under 30 and the Facebook generation of 20-30 year-olds alone makes up 20 per cent of the population, there is serious potential for protest. Their different way of communicating means that most demonstrators are not going to just give in, like the Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi, but are more likely to boldly demand their right to a share in economic prosperity and political decision-making.

The scale of the potential for conflict is even more obvious if we consider how in Tunisia the ratio of sixty-year-olds (the power elite) to twenty-year-olds (the youth) is at 2:3, and in countries like Egypt it is even more pronounced at 1:4. This provides the potential for long-term protest or even violence, something which is currently clearly targeted at the old power elites. Even if the present elite were to be completely removed from power, there would

be at least three applicants for every position becoming vacant in business and society. This means that Tunisian society cannot feel quite comfortable when facing a future with an average age of “only” 30. But Tunisia has fewer potentially frustrated or violent young people than its neighbours. Countries such as Egypt with an average age of 24 or Yemen and the Gaza strip with an average age of 17 have even greater concerns.

EGYPT'S FUTURE SCENARIO

Egypt will not find it so easy to get back to normal. There are various factors which will make the healing process much more difficult. What happens in Egypt has an enormous impact on developments in other Arab countries. Of course not every change in the Arab world originates in Egypt, but anything new generally only becomes significant for the whole region once Egypt has adopted it. A democratic awakening in Sunni countries will doubtless have ramifications for other Islamic nations.

The political system in Egypt has always been highly-centralised and bureaucratic, with the civil service, military, various security forces and previously even more numerous state-controlled companies being closely tied in with the ruling party. Almost every public position was filled by party members; indeed it was impossible to find a decent job without proof of your loyalty to the regime.

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There could well be a lot of people who have something to lose – too many perhaps, if their loyalty to the “old” regime becomes a selection criteria for future political functions and professional assignments, as the present development in Tunisia has shown. At the same time in view of the continuing mass protests, the military as well as the security forces will play an important, if not a decisive role, during the political restructuring process.

Ever since the beginning of the republic, every Egyptian president, who has always had a military background, embodied the honour and dignity of the military forces. It is for this reason that the military was not interested in seeing their “highest” representative, even if he was now

“civilianised”, chased from his position by some demonstrators in a most undignified manner. Therefore the newly installed “Highest Military Council” who implemented the president’s deprivation of power, announced that the president had “resigned”, although Mubarak had not initiated this at all.

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When we are talking about “some demonstrators” then the reason for this is that even 50,000 or 100,000 courageous opponents do not represent the wishes and hopes of a majority of 80 million Egyptians by a long way. Even if the protesters’ opinions are getting an impressive amount of coverage in the international media, it is only free elections which can accurately reflect the preferences of the Egyptian people in terms of both policies and personalities. Care must be taken not to assume that the opinions of anti-regime demonstrators will necessarily be mirrored in upcoming elections. These interviews just present a snapshot and may even be helping to distort the picture of the real mood prevailing in the country.

This particularly applies to the hopes of new leadership which are held by the majority of Egyptians, not just the demonstrators in Tahrir Square. At the moment it is difficult to really make these out due to the frightening lack of substance in the opposition’s demands, both in terms of policy and personnel. The country’s observers have known for a long time how the country’s (party) political opposition is totally fragmented, as is still shown both between and within the opposition parties. The groupings are always capable of being *against* something but very rarely *for* something.

So the opposition’s view that Mubarak cannot remain in power cannot hide the fact that there is very little that unites the protesters in Tahrir Square. And this does not take into account all those Egyptians who on a daily basis face quite different problems to those of the predominantly middle-class students thronging Tahrir Square.

If the aim of the protests is somewhat vague and undefined, the opposition also lacks a leader who can unite all the parties – the same is true in Tunisia. The Egyptian

Foreign Minister of many years' standing, Amr Moussa, is the only one who can claim to be something of a "dissident" because he resigned his post after differences of opinion with the president and became Secretary-General of the Arab League. In this way he distanced himself to some extent from the Mubarak regime, something which could stand him in good stead in light of current developments. Mohamed El Baradei, whose name is constantly mentioned by the Western media, has won a degree of recognition for his work and awards, and perhaps holds a certain appeal for the international public, but he remains largely unknown to the majority of Egyptians because of his many years spent abroad. Egyptians who turn their backs on their country for long periods are still to some extent viewed as "traitors", particularly by the many rural Egyptians who feel close ties to their homeland. He can use the excuse that he was carrying out international missions, but, unlike the demonstrators, he cannot claim to have suffered for years at the hands of the regime. This is why he will not be the one to lead the liberation movement, despite the hopes of certain western governments.

This leaves the army and security forces as the main protagonists who will not allow themselves to be pushed about by civil society. But when one sees the hatred aroused by Interior Minister Adli and knows that he and the other representatives of the security forces are in agreement over the necessary political steps, it seems doubtful that these forces can really meet all the protesters' demands. It would be equally reckless to leave the future of the insurrection and hence the future of the country solely in the hands of the army, particularly as a return to autocratic structures and processes could then not be ruled out. So there will be no successful outcome without a process of "reconciliation" between civil and military ways of acting and thinking. Politicians and military must come together to lead this country from its current impasse towards a brighter future.

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Many political observers, who assumed that Egypt might choose to use a "revolutionary council" with executive powers, as has been practised before, were proven right. The "round tables" with representatives of the Egyptian

civilian society, could not develop a permanent strategy, mainly due to obvious disputes between the various groups. Instead the "Highest Military Council" suspended the Egyptian constitution and installed a committee consisting of trusted experts to present a new draft constitution within two weeks, which will be used as a sort of "transitional constitution" to be brought into force by a referendum. This will then serve as a basis for new elections in six months' time.

The "Highest Military Council" made a resolute decision by dissolving the present Egyptian government, which was elected under questionable circumstances and nobody expected this government to play a constructive role in the restructuring process of the Egyptian governmental system.

EGYPT'S MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD – CAN THEY TAKE OVER POWER?

One of the great imponderables of this whole restructuring process in Egypt is of course the possible future role of the Muslim Brotherhood. The alleged or actual threat to the Egyptian regime posed by this organisation has for many years been the main reason why Western governments have accepted the Egyptian leadership's "robust" style of government.

There are wide-ranging views on how ready or able this group may be to fill the political vacuum which is opening up and to influence or even determine the process of political transformation taking place in Egypt. For many people, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood is still a black box. Very few Egyptians who have political contact with

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western representatives in Cairo admit to being members of this organisation which is officially banned but which has at times often been tolerated by the regime. This is why the size of its membership remains unclear and it is hard to assess their potential appeal to voters in a free and secret ballot.

Many experts believe their election chances are actually less now than they were a few months ago. This may be due to the new alternatives which have presented themselves, but could also be a misapprehension as a result of clever political manoeuvring on the part of the Brotherhood. Their behaviour during the current Tahrir Square protests – where, amazingly, hardly a single Islamic slogan has been in evidence – should not hide the fact that Egypt’s long-term political future will not be decided in the centre of Cairo but rather in a new, freely-elected Egyptian parliament. Then the young students who are today so readily providing foreign TV stations with interviews will certainly find themselves in a minority.

What is more, the Brotherhood has for some time had a declared strategy which is not geared towards the short term (legislative terms) but is aimed at the Islamic “infiltration” of all political institutions. If we take at face value their previous successes in various Egyptian professional association elections, it would seem their strategy has borne fruit.

It is not absurd to assume that the Brotherhood’s present impressive restraint is actually a calculated manoeuvre to allow the Cairo students who are so popular with the Western media to push through democratic change, which the Brotherhood can then utilise in order to take over power in a democratic and hence legitimate way.

At the moment it is equally unknown to what extent the Brotherhood will cling to their rigid ideology once they become a political party, or whether a part of the organisation would be prepared to tread a parliamentary path similar to that of the ruling AKP in Turkey. One thing is certain: the leaders of this mysterious organisation have always been very reticent about their political position whenever they have made public appearances. Political position papers have of course been presented by certain representatives in parliament, which can be traced back to the Muslim Brotherhood. But clarity will only be achieved by the political dialogue which is to come.

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However it does not hurt to study these papers if we want to evaluate the wide spectrum of political opinion which will soon be asking for the support of the Egyptian electorate. It is hard to conceive that the aging leaders of the existing opposition parties could actually be effective in countering this well-organised and ideologically hardened movement in a way that is ideologically consistent and which promises results.

It seems more realistic that the new Egyptian government will include representatives of the army and security services and that as a result some of this body's many privileges will be retained, at least for the time being. It is equally questionable whether it the old generals will still have an influence in this direct transition phase. Younger army officers would be better placed to record the new constructive distance to the political process than those old generals who just a few days ago had to appear on state television alongside the embattled president.

NDP representatives will find it difficult to exert any political influence in future. There seems little chance that the old regime's great white hope, the president's son and head of the NDP political committee, Gamal Mubarak, will have a future role to play.

THE EGYPTIAN ECONOMY

The future of the Egyptian economy has, at least for the time being, been overshadowed by the latest protests. The recent chaos has led to property and assets being destroyed, not only in Cairo, and many small and medium-sized businesses have fallen prey to vandalism and looting.

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These businesses have formed the backbone of Egypt's astonishingly robust economic growth over the last few years. The country's position as the third largest Arab economy, built up as a result of the former Nacif-led government's economically liberal policies, is now in acute danger. Economic growth rates of up to seven per cent (more recently five per cent) will be hard to emulate, and then only with foreign assistance. The depressing experiences of young Egyptian businessmen during the protests need to be converted into new hope and a new

readiness to engage and invest. The support of domestic and international banks and new lending will be required to save these businesses and encourage new start-ups. A lot will depend on how the international financial institutions assess the crisis and what happens next. It will be impossible to avoid the country's credit rating being downgraded in the medium term, along with a slide in the Egyptian stock exchange and significant weakening of the Egyptian currency.

All this can and will make it much more difficult, if not impossible, to start on the country's urgently-needed economic revival, unless the international community decides now to support Egypt with all the economic means at its disposal. Without some kind of "Marshall Plan" the Egyptian banking sector will be totally overextended in trying to finance the reconstruction.

A future role will also be sought for representatives of the Egyptian (private) economy who are not tainted by corruption. Along with their political comrades-in-arms, they will have to shoulder equal respon-

sibility for keeping the ship of state afloat.

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and tourism. Without this, there is the danger that radical autocrats of every hue could once again take control as a result of a widespread economic crisis in the country. But it is also clear that economic growth and the resulting prosperity cannot be limited to the few as has happened in the past. It is true that the government, and particularly the president, fought for years against the IMF's demands to cut subsidies on basic foodstuffs and energy, thus saving the majority of the population from suffering a drop in their standard of living, but state-controlled wages could rarely keep up with inflation. This prepared the ground for the present insurrections.

Any new Egyptian government will have to find flexible ways to confront corruption and the continuing close ties between the political and economic oligarchies. Egypt can only look forward to a bright future if there is a fairer distribution of income and assets which allows the "simple

Egyptian" to also benefit in a material way from all the upheavals which are taking place.

THE POSITION OF THE COPTIC CHRISTIANS

Any future democratic government in Egypt will face a particular challenge in dealing with the question of relations between the Muslim majority and the Coptic Christian minority. In light of recent attacks on Coptic Christians it will be necessary to calm the situation and at least return to a peaceful co-existence, even if an equal cooperation is not on the cards.

The previous administration under President Mubarak stood up for the Copts' right to religious freedom and managed to give them protection, even if it was unable to prevent every attack. It is debatable whether this minority would get better treatment under a democratic system. It mainly depends on the denominational make-up and direction of

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the new democratic political institutions and government bodies. A request for dialogue with the Muslim Brotherhood without offering the Coptic minority the same opportunity or at least consciously involving them would prove that the religious minority's representatives were laying claim to special rights. At the moment it is not clear to what extent a politically-strengthened Muslim Brotherhood would be prepared to guarantee the Coptic minority the same rights and protections granted to them by the previous administration.

REPERCUSSIONS FOR THE ARAB WORLD

It was to be expected that the events in Tunisia and now also in Egypt would lead to demonstrations in other Arab countries. After all, the political and socio-economic frameworks in these countries are not much different to those of Tunisia and Egypt. At the same time many independent observers were predicting that events would unfold in a similar way to the collapse of the Eastern Bloc in Europe. And while that possibility cannot be excluded, there is also good reason to suppose that there will not actually be such a direct domino effect. It is more likely that we will see a

more flexible but nonetheless serious reaction by individual regimes to the latest developments that have taken place.

What is clear is that the former Tunisian president Ben Ali did his colleagues in power no real favours when he fled the country so quickly. What will be interesting to see will be how the Saudi leadership reacts to his apparent request for asylum, bearing in mind that an international warrant has been issued for his arrest.

His current temporary asylum could be a double-edged sword for Saudi Arabia as it cannot fall back on the old argument that they should protect Muslim rulers from "retribution by non-Muslims", as they did with Idi Amin. However, to protect a Muslim "thief", who is not particularly well-known for his religious beliefs, from his equally Muslim "victims" and to offer him long-term sanctuary, could prove to be a difficult undertaking, even if the reasons for doing so are clearly apparent. Taking the example of the Egyptian leadership's behaviour towards the Persian Shah Pahlevi is not really going to help the Saudi leaders.

If they do eventually hand over Ben Ali, it could prove to be a destabilising loss of face for the Saudi leadership. It has to be assumed that Iran, their biggest competitors for hegemony in the region, would be more than happy to exploit this situation if it arose. Commenting on the recent developments in Egypt, Iran's revolutionary leader Khomeini indirectly positioned himself on the side of the demonstrators, even though they have little common ground, by suggesting that there was clearly an Islamisation of the Egyptian people underway. The Egyptian leadership were furious at this attempt to interfere in the country's internal affairs.

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The present situation of the former Egyptian president is, however, a different matter. It is assumed that he was forced to resign against his expressive wish and was placed under house arrest in his villa in Sharm el-Sheikh by the "Highest Military Council". It is obvious that the change of power in form of a military coup was not constitutional, however, since the "Highest Military Council" suspended the

constitution meanwhile, this has become irrelevant. There are rumours about Mubarak, being deeply disappointed by "his" generals, is at present refusing to take his medication following an operation in Germany. According to some Arabic press releases he has secretly been taken to receive medical treatment, possibly in Tabuk, Saudi Arabia.

Amongst Tunisia and Egypt's neighbouring states, it is Yemen that seems most at risk of losing its last vestiges of internal stability. This may well be the reason for the hasty announcement by Yemen's president that, in contrast to his earlier declared intentions, he will now no longer stand for another term of office in 2013. In doing so he was basically offering to go along with what is still an uncertain process of change and to give it some kind of organisational framework.

The situation in the former "socialist" inspired republics of Algeria and Syria is somewhat different. Here too there have been demonstrations, but the demonstrators' grievances have been less about the country's leadership than about socio-economic issues and the need to address them. (So far) there has not been sufficient revolutionary impetus in these countries for these demonstrations to pose a direct threat to the governments themselves. The state security apparatus in both countries would have soon put a stop to that anyway. The demands of the protesters, which were much less potentially explosive than in other Arab countries, and which were possibly even initiated by the governments themselves, or at least controlled by them, were met by the regimes with a sudden lowering of prices and a raising of subsidies that took the wind out of the sails of the protests.

In Jordan and Morocco, there is certainly more serious political frustration hidden behind the social and economic problems, but it collides with the loyalty which is still afforded to the monarchy.

The Arab monarchies, particularly Jordan and Morocco, seem even less threatened by the domino effect. As in the past, the controlled protests were aimed at economic problems and their governments, which have much less influence on the stability of these countries. As a result the rulers were able to soothe the unrest in the population by making a few cosmetic changes. There is certainly more serious political frustration hidden behind the social and economic problems which were brought to the fore, but

it collides with the loyalty which is still afforded to the monarchy in these countries. What is more, the security forces in these countries, particularly the army, are solidly behind the monarchy and not on the side of the people, a result of its composition and methods of recruiting high-ranking officers.

The Libyan regime seems also to be provoked not only just by the confusing statements of its "revolutionary leader" Ghaddafi. Whether the still ongoing demonstrations in the country will reach the "critical mass" to represent a serious threat to Ghaddafi, who has been in power for more than 40 years, remains to be seen. Just as other autocrats in the region before him, he recently successfully suppressed revolts originating in Bengasi with military force.

REPERCUSSIONS FOR ISRAEL

A look at the potential impact of events in Tunisia and Egypt on the region as a whole would not be complete without considering Israel's situation and its possible reactions to what is happening. It is clear to every political observer in the region that the current destabilisation of the "southern front" increases the likelihood of another war on two fronts.

After the peace agreements with Egypt and Jordan and the international intervention in Iraq, Israel was able to concentrate on the military threats from the "north", that is to say the direct threat from Lebanon and Syria as well as the indirect threat from Iran. While it is true that there was still a threat from the Gaza strip, this did not really require any strategic change to the country's defence efforts. However, depending on how events unfold, especially in Egypt, a strategic change may now prove to be necessary.

Israel must be aware of the fact that "democratisation" in Egypt will mean that their relationship will become more of an issue in future debates between the various political camps in Egypt.

Even Israel must be aware of the fact that further "democratisation" in Egypt will mean that the relationship between Egypt and Israel will become more of an issue in future debates between the various political camps in Egypt. This will not be a major problem for Israel if these debates are confined to democratic institutions such as parliament or the government. However, if this central

foreign policy issue becomes a political football during a democratic election, there could be incalculable consequences for Israeli-Egyptian relations. It is well known that a majority of the Egyptian people are against the idea of peace with Israel and in the past have repeatedly called for the cancellation of the peace agreement with Israel, the expulsion of Israeli embassy staff or even the (eventual) closure of the embassy itself. These sorts of demands have always been popular in Egypt and it would be very surprising if there are no factions which take up these issues in future democratic election debates.

Israeli observers' biggest reservation about whether the Muslim Brotherhood should be officially recognised is based on the realisation that, should the Brotherhood be allowed to take part in democratic elections as a recognised political party, they would bring their well known critical opinions of Israel (which is putting it mildly) into the debate to try and gain support from large numbers of Egyptian voters. There could be untold consequences. Even if only 20-30 per cent of members of a future parliament held similar views, which is a best-case scenario, it would not be possible for any Egyptian coalition government to

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avoid having to change the current foreign policy approach to dealings with Israel. And in future it seems very likely that Egypt will have a coalition government along the lines of that in Lebanon. It is very unlikely that there will be a parliamentary majority for one faction in the Egyptian parliament due to the expected number of new parties that will be formed. The founding of a party political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood is just as likely as the creation of a Coptic party.

The Israelis are well aware of all this, which is why they have so far been very cautious in their statements about the "democratic movement" in Egypt and other Arab states. While it is true that democracies tend not to turn to war as often (or as quickly) as dictators, especially against other democracies, it is also true that an Arab dictator who is "sick of war" is still better for Israel than a "bloodthirsty" Arab majority.

The Israeli leadership is also fully aware that if a future democratically-elected Egyptian government decides to scrap the Egypt-Israel peace agreement, then Jordan will be forced to follow suit in order for its regime to hold on to power. If this happens then all the successful attempts over recent decades to create stability in the region will be lost and Israel's future will be as uncertain as it was before.

However, many observers are more optimistic and believe that there will in fact be a relaxation of relations as the practice of many despotic Arab regimes to use criticism of Israel's policies as a convenient way of providing an outlet for the totally unrelated frustrations of people in their countries will come to an end. The hope is that, at the point where genuine internal political and socio-economical problems start to dominate political debate in Arab countries that are going through the process of democratisation, foreign policy issues and relations with Israel in particular will start to disappear from the front pages of newspapers. Whether this is just a pipe-dream remains to be seen.

CONCLUSION

This article is not meant to give the impression that the demands of sections of the Egyptian population for more freedom and justice and a change in the political order towards democracy and the rule of law is not universally popular. There is no doubt that such changes were long overdue and that the established regimes, especially in Egypt, have not shown sufficient willingness to introduce the kind of reforms necessary to lead their countries out of the quagmire of unresolved succession issues and political reform processes.

They are now facing a much more difficult and wide-reaching change to the political order.

How to structure this change and achieve a successful transition in a peaceful way is the task which is now facing everyone, especially

those in political office, but also all the new players on the stage. The people started this process with their demands for freedom and democracy, and at the end of the day they will be the ones who will bring it to its natural conclusion.

How to structure this change and achieve a successful transition in a peaceful way is the task which is now facing everyone, especially those in political office.

The accusations by die-hards that recent events had been instigated by radical fundamentalists in collaboration with the usual "foreign enemies" and with the help of naive, innocent citizens in order to bring down the regime, have been rejected by most observers as typical self-serving fabrications by the government.

What the American government has failed to do in eight years, namely to force the Egyptian president to introduce comprehensive reforms, has been achieved in eight days by brave citizens who have overcome their normal apathy. This just goes to prove that the influence of outsiders and the supposed omnipotence of autocrats are in fact relative. Many of those in positions of power in the region will be rightly concerned about this and will hopefully be encouraged to introduce reforms of their own.

Offering unsolicited advice or trying to get involved in the political process from the outside is not going to help. The Tunisian and Egyptian people would not be prepared to tolerate it anyway.

While foreign countries may talk about their hopes and concerns, it will be the key players in the effected countries themselves who will be responsible for the political developments to come. Offering unsolicited advice or trying to get involved in the political process from the outside is not going to help, and the Tunisian and Egyptian people would not be prepared to tolerate it anyway.

Dignity and pride, together with a new-found self-confidence will be what drive the internal process until that point is reached where the representatives of the new political order are happy to discuss their hopes and ideas with other countries. It is conceivable that Egypt will not be able to deal with all these upheavals on its own or without the help of other countries or financial assistance. Egypt's economy may need to be helped just as much as the new democratic order within the (pre-) political arena. The necessary new elections will require fundamental as well as legislative change. They can only take place once the new democratic political players have consolidated their positions to such an extent that they can compete not only with the well-organized Muslim Brotherhood, but also with those who profited from the old political order and who will surely have regrouped by the time of the elections.

In this respect there is now an opportunity, especially for Europe, to play a constructive part in the change process and to give a fresh impetus to those institutions and instruments of Mediterranean politics that have been created in recent times. Germany, along with other East European countries, still has fresh memories of experiencing similar political upheavals. Obviously not every step along the path of change will be the same, and not every instrument will be suited to this very different cultural and religious frame of reference, but that does not mean they are totally irrelevant. It is now for the Egyptians to decide whether and to what extent they want to accept the help that is offered. They should not have to wait long for these offers of help to arrive.