

Facing the winds of change

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Egypt and Tunisia prove many presumptions about Arabs wrong

The Arab world will never be the same after Feb. 11, the day Hosni Mubarak, president of Egypt for 30 years, finally acquiesced to public pressure and gave up his post, transferring his authorities to a high military council. Mubarak's sudden departure and the events that preceded his fall have stunned the world, whose eyes were fixed on Midan Al Tahrir or Liberation Square in the heart of Cairo for 18 long days and nights.

In less than a month citizens, mostly youth, have deposed two tenacious regimes in Tunisia and Egypt. Is the Arab world in revolutionary mode? Certainly the reverberations of the Egyptian revolution will be felt in the region for many years. The Tunisian revolt was a game changer and after Egypt all eyes are carefully following unfolding events in Yemen, Algeria, Libya, Sudan, Jordan and even Iran.

Change is coming regardless of how things turn out in these and other countries. But it does not have to follow the Tunisian and Egyptian models. It is now up to governments and ruling regimes to understand the new realities and act accordingly.

But what kind of change can we expect and can governments and rulers manage the upcoming challenges? One thing is certain: The two revolutions were non ideological ones, with youth leading the protests before political parties and unions decided to join them. Their main complaints were against economic injustice and absence of democracy. Even religious banners were not there, and the driving force came mainly from the educated, and largely unemployed, middle class.

There were contrasts and similarities between the two fallen regimes. Both relied heavily on the iron grip of their security apparatus and both were corrupt and ruthless in dealing with the opposition. It was the cumulative pressure of police transgressions that triggered mass protests in both countries.

For decades it was believed that Arab regimes were able to handle their citizens in spite of global changes elsewhere. Previous uprisings in Egypt, Syria, Algeria and others were brutally suppressed. Rarely did Arab rulers make concessions or allow genuine reforms. Ironically the West described these regimes as stable and only occasionally criticized human rights violations in individual countries. Despite these countries' special relations with the West, primarily the US, few endured real pressure to launch major reforms. Most were dubbed as moderate but only in terms of their attitude toward Israel, the Middle East peace process, radical Islam and Iran. Their internal politics were theirs to manage as they saw fit.

But if Tunisia and Egypt have suddenly succumbed to popular revolt amid Western shock and awe, what does this say about the rest of the region? Economic injustice exists in almost every Arab country today. Young and educated citizens make up at least half of the populations of these countries. And if these regimes have anything in common it is their blind reliance on their police forces that have been trained to crack down on any popular resistance. People often joke that the only successful pan-Arab meeting is that of the Arab interior ministers!

There are other common denominators as well, such as official corruption, kleptocracy, nepotism and lack of democratic traditions and institutions. For years it was thought the Arabs never revolt against their rulers and that democracy is not a main demand by the people. Both presumptions have been proven wrong.

After Egypt, and Tunisia, Arab rulers and governments will need to reassess their position. The communications revolution has empowered people across the globe and the Arabs are no exception. There are an estimated 20 million Arab subscribers to Facebook, the social networking leader. Only time and further studies will tell how much did Twitter, Facebook and Al Jazeera, among others, contribute to the revolutions of Tunisia and Egypt.

So what should Arab governments do? They can ignore the writing on the wall and pretend that their countries are different from Egypt and Tunisia. That would be a terminal mistake. Or they can initiate reforms and take lead. There are signs that this is already happening in Jordan, Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen in varying degrees. How much can be done depends on the political will of each ruler. Some can go all the way to the extent that they can successfully preserve the regime while meeting popular demands. Others will have to bargain and hope that they can strike a deal before it is too late.

Globalization has changed our world in a way that many Arab leaders are unable to fathom. Democracy is no longer a foreign concept alien to most Arabs. Millions practice it in the virtual world every day. It is digging roots and changing minds and hearts. The gap, virtual and real, between leaders and citizens is getting bigger. People are waking up to a new reality. Egypt, being the important country that it is, will have an effect on the rest. Change can come through tumults or it can be managed peacefully. Arab leaders have a choice and the dire ends of regimes in Egypt and Tunisia are not destined to repeat themselves elsewhere; that is if the rulers understand what happened and why!

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