

## COMMENTARY

# SPRING CLEAN OF DICTATORS

A democratic revolution is sweeping North Africa and the Middle-East. It began in Tunisia last December and quickly spread to Egypt, Algeria, Yemen, Libya, Bahrain, and now to Syria. Protests for democratic reforms have begun to take shape in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well. It is clear that a fourth wave of democratization has begun, even though not all these countries are likely to be transformed into multi-party democracies. Some of these struggles might not succeed, even massive amidst popular revolts. Even then, one thing is clear: the Arab world is in a new historical phase of democratic transition.

In a chronological sense, it all began with post-election crisis in Ivory Coast in West Africa where an authoritarian President refused to leave office even after he lost the Presidential election. Instead of handing over power to the winner of the election, Laurent Gbagbo got the country's Constitutional Court declare himself the victor. Meanwhile, Alassane Quattara, the winner of the election, who happened to be the leader of the opposition, was sworn in as the President and he was immediately recognized by the international community. But that did not bring the standoff to an end. Even after mediatory efforts by neighboring countries, Gbagbo refuses to leave office and stays in power by force. An authoritarian ruler in power for thirty years is defying the popular electoral

verdict, as if there is no life for him outside Presidential office and palace. Ivory Coast is in the brink of a civil war.

In contrast, Tunisia and Egypt have succeeded in getting rid of their long-time dictatorial Presidents with relatively less political and human cost. When Ben Ali in Tunisia went on exile on his own amidst a mass protest movement, Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was forced to leave office after weeks of popular protests. However, the Egyptian success was not easy. Mubarak and his bureaucratic and military cronies were making plans to stay in power by any means necessary. There was even the likelihood of martial law being declared to protect the unpopular Mubarak regime. Amidst growing and determined popular opposition campaign for democracy and regime change, the US and Western allies appeared to have decided to dump their long standing ally. That perhaps was the decisive immediate factor that ultimately facilitated the relatively painless departure of Mubarak and his family from power. The post-Mubarak Egypt is now in a phase of democratic transformation. A process of constitutional and political change in place, creating space for political freedom, multi-party democracy, human rights and media freedom, and free and fair elections.

The way in which events are unfolding in Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria

seem to be quite different from both Tunisia and Egypt. There, authoritarian rulers are refusing to step down and have even been using the armed forces and the police to unleash a massive crackdown on pro-democracy protest movements. Repression has worked in

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these countries in the past as well. The authoritarian ruling cliques are obviously counting on the efficacy of brutal repression for survival. Will the popular movements for democratic change in these countries have the will, capacity and energy to survive and eventually force their dictators out of power?

Meanwhile, the international military involvement in the Libyan crisis has altered the nature of the on-going crisis in North Africa and the Middle East dramatically. The UN Security Council endorsement and some support from a few Arab countries have given legality and some political legitimacy to the US, British and French -led military campaign in Libya. The Western military might crush Gaddafi's military machine within a few weeks. Yet, a West-led regime change is not likely to accord any political legitimacy to either the fledging democracy movement in Libya or the post-Gaddafi political order. A client regime of the West in Libya will hardly be a model for democratic movements in other African and Middle Eastern countries. Another Iraq in the region can actually be not in the interest of the newly-emerged and unprecedented historical opportunity for democratization in Africa and the Middle East.

The Western military involvement in Libya occurred against a fast moving chain of events in Libya where the democracy movement was running the imminent risk of being crushed by Gaddafi's ruthless military machine. Even then, a fundamental question, which the West has not yet recognized, remains. It is about democratization of a set of authoritarian states which, except Syria, has so far enjoyed the status of clienthood of the West, enjoying its political, military and economic support, despite decades of continuing repression of their own citizens. These are also corrupt and tyrannical regimes which the West tolerated for its own strategic reasons. The remaining modern dictators are not likely to

leave power in the way Ben Ali and Mubarak did. With the threat of external military intervention, they might even gain new support and legitimacy to stay in. More tragically, democracy movements might even run the risk of losing internal popular support.

What would be the option for democracy movements, now under threat by a strange combination of their internal adversaries and external allies? The option perhaps is for them to tell Barak Obama, Ban Ki-moon, David Cameron, Nicolas Sarkozy and Abu Musa to address the issue politically and at an international level. What they should tell big powers and Ban-ki Moon is to summon a UN Security Council meeting to discuss not strategies of military intervention on their behalf, but how to strategize appropriate political interventions to weaken the dictators and strengthen the democracy movements. Democratization of North Africa and the Middle East is a global issue and promoting it through Western military power might spell disaster to the fourth wave of democratization...

Turning spontaneous democratic mass movements seeking political change into armed conflicts with authoritarian regimes, as the example of Libya now shows, is not the best way to facilitate democratic transition that of course involves regime change and retirement of dictators and their cronies. These are also regimes quite used to brutal repression of opposition and resistance. They have powerful armies which they will not hesitate to use against their own citizens. But, as developments in all these countries also show, there are serious cracks in the regimes. Non-military strategies to deepen those cracks into political crisis along with people's peaceful uprisings are what President Obama and his European allies should now explore, before it is too late. Handing over the Libyan operation to NATO would hardly be a sane policy. ■

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