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Revolution and the Muslim World

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The Muslim world, from North Africa to Iran, has experienced a wave of instability in the last few weeks. No regimes have been overthrown yet, although as of this writing, Libya was teetering on the brink.

There have been moments in history where revolution spread in a region or around the world as if it were a wildfire. These moments do not come often. Those that come to mind include 1848, where a rising in France engulfed Europe. There was also 1968, where the demonstrations of what we might call the New Left swept the world: Mexico City, Paris, New York and hundreds of other towns saw anti-war revolutions staged by Marxists and other radicals. Prague saw the Soviets smash a New Leftist government. Even China's Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution could, by a stretch, be included. In 1989, a wave of unrest, triggered by East Germans wanting to get to the West, generated an uprising in Eastern Europe that overthrew Soviet rule.

Each had a basic theme. The 1848 uprisings attempted to establish liberal democracies in nations that had been submerged in the reaction to Napoleon. 1968 was about radical reform in capitalist society. 1989 was about the overthrow of communism. They were all more complex than that, varying from country to country. But in the end, the reasons behind them could reasonably be condensed into a sentence or two.

Some of these revolutions had great impact. 1989 changed the global balance of power. 1848 ended in failure at the time — France reverted to a monarchy within four years — but set the stage for later political changes. 1968 produced little that was lasting. The key is that in each country where they took place, there were significant differences in the details — but they shared

core principles at a time when other countries were open to those principles, at least to some extent.

The Current Rising in Context

In looking at the current rising, the geographic area is clear: The Muslim countries of North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula have been the prime focus of these risings, and in particular North Africa where Egypt, Tunisia and now Libya have had profound crises. Of course, many other Muslim countries also had revolutionary events that have not, at least until now, escalated into events that threaten regimes or even ruling personalities. There have been hints of such events elsewhere. There were small demonstrations in China, and of course Wisconsin is in turmoil over budget cuts. But these don't really connect to what is happening in the Middle East. The first was small and the second is not taking inspiration from Cairo. So what we have is a rising in the Arab world that has not spread beyond there for the time being.

The key principle that appears to be driving the risings is a feeling that the regimes, or a group of individuals within the regimes, has deprived the public of political and, more important, economic rights — in short, that they enriched themselves beyond what good taste permitted. This has expressed itself in different ways. In Bahrain, for example, the rising was of the primarily Shiite population against a predominantly Sunni royal family. In Egypt, it was against the person of Hosni Mubarak. In Libya, it is against the regime and person of Moammar Gadhafi and his family, and is driven by tribal hostility.

Why has it come together now? One reason is that there was a tremendous amount of regime change in the region from the 1950s through the early 1970s, as the Muslim countries created regimes to replace foreign imperial powers and were buffeted by the Cold War. Since the early 1970s, the region has, with the exception of Iran in 1979, been fairly stable in the sense that the regimes — and even the personalities who rose up in the unstable phase — stabilized their countries and imposed regimes that could not easily be moved. Gadhafi, for example, overthrew the Libyan monarchy in 1969 and has governed continually for 42 years since then.

Any regime dominated by a small group of people over time will see that group use their position to enrich themselves. There are few who can resist for 40 years. It is important to recognize that Gadhafi, for example, was once a genuine, pro-Soviet revolutionary. But over time, revolutionary zeal declines and avarice emerges along with the arrogance of extended power. And in the areas of the region where there had not been regime changes since after World War I, this principle stays true as well, although interestingly, over time, the regimes seem to learn to spread the wealth a bit.

Thus, what emerged throughout the region were regimes and individuals who were classic kleptocrats. More than anything, if we want to define this wave of unrest, particularly in North Africa, it is a rising against regimes — and particularly individuals — who have been in place for extraordinarily long periods of time. And we can add to this that they are people who were planning to maintain family power and money by installing sons as their political heirs. The same process, with variations, is under way in the Arabian Peninsula. This is a rising against the revolutionaries of previous generations.

The revolutions have been coming for a long time. The rising in Tunisia, particularly when it proved successful, caused it to spread. As in 1848, 1968 and 1989, similar social and cultural conditions generate similar events and are triggered by the example of one country and then spread more broadly. That has happened in 2011 and is continuing.

A Uniquely Sensitive Region

It is, however, happening in a region that is uniquely sensitive at the moment. The U.S.-jihadist war means that, as with previous revolutionary waves, there are broader potential geopolitical implications. 1989 meant the end of the Soviet empire, for example. In this case, the question of greatest importance is not why these revolutions are taking place, but who will take advantage of them. We do not see these revolutions as a vast conspiracy by radical Islamists to take control of the region. A conspiracy that vast is easily detected, and the security forces of the individual countries would have destroyed the conspiracies quickly. No one organized the previous waves, although there have been conspiracy theories about them as well. They arose from certain conditions, following the example of one incident. But particular groups certainly tried, with greater and lesser success, to take advantage of them.

In this case, whatever the cause of the risings, there is no question that radical Islamists will attempt to take advantage and control of them. Why wouldn't they? It is a rational and logical course for them. Whether they will be able to do so is a more complex and important question, but that they would want to and are trying to do so is obvious. They are a broad, transnational and disparate group brought up in conspiratorial methods. This is their opportunity to create a broad international coalition. Thus, as with traditional communists and the New Left in the 1960s, they did not create the rising but they would be fools not to try to take advantage of it. I would add that there is little question but that the United States and other Western countries are trying to influence the direction of the uprisings. For both sides, this is a difficult game to play, but it is particularly difficult for the United States as outsiders to play this game compared to native Islamists who know their country.

But while there is no question that Islamists would like to take control of the revolution, that does not mean that they will, nor does it mean that these revolutions will be successful. Recall that 1848 and 1968 were failures and those who tried to take advantage of them had no vehicle to ride. Also recall that taking control of a revolution is no easy thing. But as we saw in Russia in 1917, it is not necessarily the more popular group that wins, but the best organized. And you frequently don't find out who is best organized until afterwards.

Democratic revolutions have two phases. The first is the establishment of democracy. The second is the election of governments. The example of Hitler is useful as a caution on what kind of governments a young democracy can produce, since he came to power through democratic and constitutional means — and then abolished democracy to cheering crowds. So there are three crosscurrents here. The first is the reaction against corrupt regimes. The second is the election itself. And the third? The United States needs to remember, as it applauds the rise of democracy, that the elected government may not be what one expected.

In any event, the real issue is whether these revolutions will succeed in replacing existing regimes. Let's consider the process of revolution for the moment, beginning by distinguishing a demonstration from an uprising. A demonstration is merely the massing of people making speeches. This can unsettle the regime and set the stage for more serious events, but by itself, it is not significant. Unless the demonstrations are large enough to paralyze a city, they are symbolic events. There have been many demonstrations in the Muslim world that have led nowhere; consider Iran.

It is interesting here to note that the young frequently dominate revolutions like 1848, 1969 and 1989 at first. This is normal. Adults with families and maturity rarely go out on the streets to face guns and tanks. It takes young people to have the courage or lack of judgment to risk their lives in what might be a hopeless cause. However, to succeed, it is vital that at some point other classes of society join them. In Iran, one of the key moments of the 1979 revolution was when the shopkeepers joined young people in the street. A revolution only of the young, as we saw in 1968 for example, rarely succeeds. A revolution requires a broader base than that, and it must go beyond demonstrations. The moment it goes beyond the demonstration is when it confronts troops and police. If the demonstrators disperse, there is no revolution. If they confront the troops and police, and if they carry on even after they are fired on, then you are in a revolutionary phase. Thus, pictures of peaceful demonstrators are not nearly as significant as the media will have you believe, but pictures of demonstrators continuing to hold their ground after being fired on is very significant.

A Revolution's Key Event

This leads to the key event in the revolution. The revolutionaries cannot defeat armed men. But if those armed men, in whole or part, come over to the revolutionary side, victory is possible. And this is the key event. In Bahrain, the troops fired on demonstrators and killed some. The demonstrators dispersed and then were allowed to demonstrate — with memories of the gunfire fresh. This was a revolution contained. In Egypt, the military and police opposed each other and the military sided with the demonstrators, for complex reasons obviously. Personnel change, if not regime change, was inevitable. In Libya, the military has split wide open.

When that happens, you have reached a branch in the road. If the split in the military is roughly equal and deep, this could lead to civil war. Indeed, one way for a revolution to succeed is to proceed to civil war, turning the demonstrators into an army, so to speak. That's what Mao did in China. Far more common is for the military to split. If the split creates an overwhelming anti-regime force, this leads to the revolution's success. Always, the point to look for is thus the police joining with the demonstrators. This happened widely in 1989 but hardly at all in 1968. It happened occasionally in 1848, but the balance was always on the side of the state. Hence, that revolution failed.

It is this act, the military and police coming over to the side of the demonstrators, that makes or breaks a revolution. Therefore, to return to the earlier theme, the most important question on the role of radical Islamists is not their presence in the crowd, but their penetration of the military and police. If there were a conspiracy, it would focus on joining the military, waiting for demonstrations and then striking.

Those who argue that these risings have nothing to do with radical Islam may be correct in the sense that the demonstrators in the streets may well be students enamored with democracy. But they miss the point that the students, by themselves, can't win. They can only win if the regime wants them to, as in Egypt, or if other classes and at least some of the police or military — people armed with guns who know how to use them — join them. Therefore, looking at the students on TV tells you little. Watching the soldiers tells you much more.

The problem with revolutions is that the people who start them rarely finish them. The idealist democrats around Alexander Kerensky in Russia were not the ones who finished the revolution. The thuggish Bolsheviks did. In these Muslim countries, the focus on the young demonstrators misses the point just as it did in Tiananmen Square. It wasn't the demonstrators that mattered, but the soldiers. If they carried out orders, there would be no revolution.

I don't know the degree of Islamist penetration of the military in Libya, to pick one example of the unrest. I suspect that tribalism is far more important than theology. In Egypt, I suspect the regime has saved itself by buying time. Bahrain was more about Iranian influence on the Shiite population than Sunni jihadists at work. But just as the Iranians are trying to latch on to the process, so will the Sunni jihadists.

The Danger of Chaos

I suspect some regimes will fall, mostly reducing the country in question to chaos. The problem, as we are seeing in Tunisia, is that frequently there is no one on the revolutionaries' side equipped to take power. The Bolsheviks had an organized party. In these revolutions, the parties are trying to organize themselves during the revolution, which is another way to say that the revolutionaries are in no position to govern. The danger is not radical Islam, but chaos, followed either by civil war, the military taking control simply to stabilize the situation or the emergence of a radical Islamic party to take control — simply because they are the only ones in the crowd with a plan and an organization. That's how minorities take control of revolutions.

All of this is speculation. What we do know is that this is not the first wave of revolution in the world, and most waves fail, with their effects seen decades later in new regimes and political cultures. Only in the case of Eastern Europe do we see broad revolutionary success, but that was against an empire in collapse, so few lessons can be drawn from that for the Muslim world.

In the meantime, as you watch the region, remember not to watch the demonstrators. Watch the men with the guns. If they stand their ground for the state, the demonstrators have failed. If some come over, there is some chance of victory. And if victory comes, and democracy is declared, do not assume that what follows will in any way please the West — democracy and pro-Western political culture do not mean the same thing.

The situation remains fluid, and there are no broad certainties. It is a country-by-country matter now, with most regimes managing to stay in power to this point. There are three possibilities. One is that this is like 1848, a broad rising that will fail for lack of organization and coherence, but that will resonate for decades. The second is 1968, a revolution that overthrew no regime

even temporarily and left some cultural remnants of minimal historical importance. The third is 1989, a revolution that overthrew the political order in an entire region, and created a new order in its place.

If I were to guess at this point, I would guess that we are facing 1848. The Muslim world will not experience massive regime change as in 1989, but neither will the effects be as ephemeral as 1968. Like 1848, this revolution will fail to transform the Muslim world or even just the Arab world. But it will plant seeds that will germinate in the coming decades. I think those seeds will be democratic, but not necessarily liberal. In other words, the democracies that eventually arise will produce regimes that will take their bearings from their own culture, which means Islam.

The West celebrates democracy. It should be careful what it hopes for: It might get it.