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Why Do Arabs Not Revolt?

Why do the top-heavy, non-democratic political control and governance systems of the Arab world persist without any significant popular opposition or public challenge?

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BEIRUT - The stark contrast between the street demonstrations in Iran in the past two weeks and the absence of any such popular revolts in the Arab world during the past half-century is more than just fascinating in terms of political anthropology. A major question that hangs over the Arab world like a ton of bricks is: Why do the top-heavy, non-democratic political control and governance systems of the Arab world persist without any significant popular opposition or public challenge?

The events in Iran -- the second major popular rebellion in the past 30 years -- accentuate the relative quiescence in the Arab world, but this is not for lack of grievances among Arabs. The same pressures and indignities that annoy many Iranians and push them to openly challenge their rulers are prevalent throughout much of the Arab world:

- abuse of power by a self-contained ruling elite,
- absence of meaningful political accountability,
- dominance of the power structure by security-military organs,
- prevalent corruption and financial abuse,
- mediocre economic management,
- enforced leadership hero-worshipping and personality cults,
- strict social controls -- especially on the young and women.

Only once has a popular revolt forced a change of government in the Arab world, which was the 1985 overthrow of Sudanese President Jaafar Numeiry. All other coups and regime changes in the Arab world have been the work of a small number of military officers or foreign governments. Mass Arab uprisings have occurred against foreign occupation or domination, such as the two Palestinian intifadas against Israeli occupation, the anti-Syrian uprising in Lebanon in 2005, and assorted anti-colonial rebellions. Small militant groups have also challenged Arab regimes -- such as violent Islamists in Syria, Egypt and Algeria in the 1980s and 90s -- but were always beaten down.

The sheer power of police and security organizations is not a sufficient explanation of Arab popular passivity, because angry populations around the world have confronted and toppled equally powerful security forces, such as the Shah's Iran or most of the East European Soviet states. Lack of courage also is not a satisfying explanation, either, because Arab men and women throughout the region have defied and confronted their governments in many ways over the past half century -- yet always falling short of taking to the streets in mass demonstrations aimed at toppling the regime.

One of the possible explanations is that angry or frustrated Arab men and women do not relate to their central government in the same way that Iranians do (or Turks, also). Indignant Iranians or Turks who are fed up with their government's abuse of power demand a change in government behavior, and use available means to bring about that change. Arabs in a similar situation seem to largely ignore their governments, and instead set up parallel structures in society that offer them the same practical and intangible services that central governments normally provide in more coherent countries.

Massive movements of discontented citizens throughout the Arab world have channeled their energy into several arenas that coexist in parallel with the state. These include Islamist and other religious movements, tribal structures, non-governmental organizations, and the private sector to a lesser extent. Some of these movements, like Hizbullah and Hamas, grew briskly and have become parallel states in every respect, including military power, social services, economic clout, and international diplomatic engagement.

One possible explanation for why discontented Iranians or Turks try to capture and reconfigure their state governance machinery, while Arabs tend to avoid it and simply build their own parallel structures, may have to do with the most basic factors of nation and state legitimacy, efficacy and credibility. Iran and Turkey enjoy powerful, ancient legitimacy as nation-states, while most Arab countries do not, because most of them are modern creations of brazen, slightly eccentric, Euro-colonialists.

Rather than wanting to manage the very difficult socio-economic challenges that define countries like Yemen, Egypt, Syria, Morocco, Algeria and Sudan, it is much more attractive for discontented political and social movements to carve out a space for themselves in society, mostly ignore the central government, and get on with the business of catering to the needs of their constituents. Consequently, central governments in most Arab countries beyond the oil states are finding that their impact and footprint in society are slowly narrowing, in line with their often-diminished legitimacy. Arab regimes to a large extent are not being challenged by their own people, they are being contained and shrunk.

It is possible that the lack of popular Arab revolts against the state is less a comment on the passive nature of Arab citizenship and political psyche, and more a comment on the declining

allure of the prize of political incumbency in Arab state governance systems whose impact and legitimacy continue to fray at the edges, and that cater to a smaller and smaller constituency of true believers at their core.