

THE 'ARAB REVOLT' AND TRIBAL SECTARIAN DIVISIONS

Farid Mirbagheri

Professor of International Relations, University of Nicosia

The revolt in the Arab world has had diverse outcomes. In Tunisia, where it all started, it has led to a relatively peaceful transition to democracy and to a lesser degree Egypt's experience has also been less bloody than others. However, chaos, carnage, civil war and much human suffering have ensued in Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain. Why have these differences in outcomes have come as a result of the same social movement that has demanded change in the status quo?

Egypt is the most populous and arguably the most important Arab country. It was home to Muslim Brotherhood that was established by Hassan-Al-Banna in 1928. Abdu, Seyyed Qutb amongst other Islamist reformists and radicals came from Egypt. The oldest university in the world, Al-Azhar, a pre-eminent source of Sunni Islamic rulings is based there. Politically its nationalization of the Suez Canal in the face of British, French and Israeli opposition gave rise to Pan-Arabism, the hero of which, Jamal Abdo-Nasser was an Egyptian president. It led two wars against Israel and then pioneered peace with Tel Aviv that shocked the world. It has been the leader of the Arab League almost since its foundation. But most important of all, in that year and a half, it has delivered the most devastating blow to political Islam yet.

In the light of the huge network of Muslim Brotherhood and their popularity in the immediate aftermath of Mubarak's downfall one would have assumed ousting of their candidate, Mohammad Mursi, from power by the Egyptian army would have been accompanied with much bloodshed more perhaps than in any other country in the MENA region. That was not the case, however. Compared to Syria or Libya, the change of two governments in Cairo in less than three years was relatively peaceful.

Syria, ruled by a minority sect for over forty years, has been aflame with the fire of a tragic civil war with no end in sight. Over 150,000 deaths have failed to break the deadlock over the political future of the country. Neither have Libya, Yemen and to a lesser degree Bahrain have been able to emulate the Egyptian and the Tunisian cases in changing the political make-up of their governments. What are the factors that lend themselves to relatively peaceful fundamental change by popular demand in Egypt and Tunisia that are not present in the other countries affected by the Arab revolt?

The answer to that key question may revolve around the all-important principle of tribalism and sectarianism. Whilst Libya, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain are essentially tribal societies, where the tribal code of conduct has precluded the emergence of a strong sense of nationalism and has thus preempted the formation of all-pervasive national institutions, Egypt and

Tunisia, un-tribal in their character, have been able to establish national institutions based on a sense of national unity and a nationalist ethos; the most important of which have been the development of nationalist security apparatus and the armed forces. The high regard and respect Egyptians have for their army, unique in the Arab world, indicates the presence of a sense of Egyptian nationalism. Tunisian armed forces are also a national institution.

In tribal societies of the Middle East and North Africa, tribal loyalties going back thousands of years have not been replaced by allegiance to the state that is hardly a hundred years old. It is therefore not surprising to see that close confidants of rulers in those countries and their key intelligence and army personnel are chosen from the same tribe/sect that the ruling family comes from. This was the case with Gaddafi in Libya (Warfalla tribe), is the case with Assad in Syria (Alawite sect), Salih in Yemen (using different tribes), A-Saleh family in Bahrain (Sunnis) and of course was the case in Saddam's Iraq (Al-Takrit). As tribal and sectarian loyalties precede and usually overwhelm any 'national' allegiance, tribal interests override 'national' interests. In consequence resisting change in the leadership of the country, that will be viewed against tribal interests and honour by the members of the tribe but may in fact be very much in the interest of the country, becomes a matter of pride, honour and tribal identity and loyalty i.e. they will fight to the last for the preservation of the status-quo. The adversarial tribal relations may also mean that any fundamental change can threaten the physical survival of the ruling tribe particularly in the light of atrocities that may have been committed by them. Gaddafi's fate was a stark reminder of that possibility.

This sense of tribalism and sectarianism has wreaked havoc in Damascus, has caused bloodshed and strife in Libya, has successfully resisted change in Bahrain, is driving Iraq towards partition and is playing its role, though yet undetermined, in Yemen. On the other hand, Egypt and Tunisia, free from tribal and sectarian schism, have managed to steer towards representative government in a less violent fashion than others. Their armed and security forces have a strong sense of national interests that overwhelms even the most stubborn of political doctrines: political Islam. This was demonstrated in Egypt when in response to tens of millions of Egyptians flooding the streets of Cairo, Egyptian army deposed the Muslim Brotherhood leader. It was also quite evident in Tunisia when the largest party, the Islamic Ennahda, that could have incorporated Shari'a into the constitution, decided not to do so in the interest of national harmony.

Fundamental change in the MENA region will in all likelihood be resisted violently in tribal/sectarian countries. As in Iraq and Libya transformation of the status quo is only possible after superior armed intervention, usually by the outsiders, diminish the military capacity of the ruling elite. Syria, therefore, may not see change until and unless that happens. The same may go for other countries in the region seemingly unaffected by the Arab revolt

yet.