The New Era of the Arab World

Movements of Change in the Arab World: A Regional Transition?

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The events that have rocked the entire Arab world, with very few exceptions, since the beginning of 2011, have made headlines across the globe, bringing to the fore a series of unavoidable debates and reflections for experts, academics and analysts.

First and foremost, and one of their fundamental characteristics, is the unpredictability of the political terrain, particularly in the sphere of international politics, in the widest sense of the word. Social sciences, the theory of international relations, political science or the economy have certain methodological and analytical weaknesses, some of which are difficult to correct or modify, but we are at least aware of them: what exploded throughout the Arab world had not been predicted by anyone, not in the affected political regimes, their respective civil societies, the Western world, or even among the most renowned of international academics. Indeed, disregarding for a moment the gravity of the news of his death on 2 May 2011, the Arab revolts caught Bin Laden and what has come to be known as the "al-Qaeda franchise" entirely unawares.

This unpredictability is perfectly comparable – if we give the situation the appropriate historical perspective and some of its content more relevance – with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, or the simple possibility that Gorbachev's Perestroika in its beginnings would not only put an end to the bipolar world and the Cold War, but also the Soviet political regime itself. The comparison, of course, is of relative value and should not be overly studied, as this would assume similar global consequences. But it is valid for reaffirming the unpredictability of politics.

Secondly, and this is connected with the previous point, we are also witness to the concept of the "autonomy of politics" or to be more precise of "anything political" (as a wider and more inclusive concept), understood as the validity of the collective subjective will of a society to make decisions, trigger processes, open new channels or break from the traditional politico-social dynamics in place until now. In itself this is nothing new, the importance of this "autonomy of politics" has been recognised since the days of Machiavelli, or before, up until the present, throughout the complex history of political and social ideas. But in the case in hand, the reaffirmation has been truly spectacular, exploding within the context of authoritarian regimes or outright dictatorships, which, in theory, leave civil society little margin for autonomous action.

Thirdly, it is important to note the secular nature of all these movements in their disparities, with their diverse expressions, and to what extent this secularity will extend towards the future, in other words towards the type of political and institutional formulas proposed as alternatives. They are not only demanding freedom, amnesty and elections, among other things, but also the separation of powers, free press and the legalisation of parties; in other words, a representative democracy like ours. It should be emphasised that the movements of these past months, from Algeria to Egypt, Tunisia to Yemen, have been urban-based, indicating that the cleavage between urban and rural areas or the flows of urban growth in these countries are more important than was initially apparent, or that these were merely studied as phenomena of demographic social movements. This secularisation has been clearly strengthened by the absence, or marginality, of an Islamic (in its diverse expressions, fundamentalist or not), politicised religious discourse. These revolutionary movements, therefore, have constructed their internal and inter-

national legitimacy from the aforementioned secular language of lay politics: the equivalent of the demands of the great European revolutions of the last two and a half centuries; or more if we consider the English revolution of the 17th century, and its fight for the *habeas corpus* or bill of rights.

Fourthly, it is also striking to note that these movements, as far as we can determine in the first three months of the revolts, have been highly transparent in their structural and organisational simplicity. Their outbreaks have been spontaneous, without prior organisation. (Had this existed of course, it would have been in secret, since these were dictatorial regimes.) They were not classified, prepared, programmed, with prior tactics or strategies, and no organisation, Islamist or secular, can claim to have led or managed them. It is true, as has happened in the case of crises in other authoritarian regimes, in other transitions, that a host of new parties and diverse leaderships have emerged, some of which have had a part to play – the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and few others. But in these fallen regimes, such as Tunisia, Egypt or Libya, if there was any surviving opposition, it was imprisoned, exiled or, for all intents and purposes, destroyed. Naturally, in more advanced phases of the transition that is underway, it will be no mean feat for this fragmented plurality of political options to search out and eventually find a relevant space for its institutional presence. But there will be a process of "natural selection," an electoral solution or social influence at different levels.

This is exactly what a transition is, and if concluded with reasonable success – and there is no assurance for that across the board – the competition on the way will be tough, including interventions from the media, social networks and diverse international actors; indeed the race to influence society will adopt multiple forms. The revolts have been social, popular, spontaneous, without prior preparation and have organised themselves in real time as they developed; but six or eight months since they began, neither Tunisia or Egypt have a new system of parties, a truly legitimised government running for election, or a political force that represents the majority of the people. This phase is "under construction."

Fifthly, and perceivable in the initial phase of the revolts, the movement has had diverse expressions, but with a similar underlying format: the aforementioned urban sphere (as a realm of action), young people, women activists (of particular relevance in the social traditions of the Arab world) and exhaus-

tive use of the famed social networks and the Internet, with all its potential, etc. In some cases, regimes seem to have regained the initiative after the first few weeks, like in Algeria; in others their fall from grace has been dizzying, like in Tunisia and Egypt; others seem to drag on interminably with their dictators clutching to the power, like in Yemen after six months, with protestors winning in certain areas, while in others the confrontation has reached a stalemate; finally, there are those cases where the regime has, at least provisionally, led its own self-reform, such as that of Morocco and Jordan, where the fact that the monarchy is so deeply rooted in society and enjoys a high degree of historical legitimacy seems to play an essential role, and their civil societies are (very relatively) more autonomous and "denser" in their expression. Citizens identify themselves with these monarchic forms of State and Government, because they facilitate their loyalties to the *watan* (fatherland) and *dawlat* (State) in a way which is compatible with the demanded democratic reforms. Finally, we have the variants of Libya and Syria, who have opted for mass, systematic repression, with the risk of civil war provoking different responses from the international community, which we will address later.

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It is true that historically in the political culture that we call "Arabism," the highest legitimacy of a citizen's various loyalties resided (according to the hegemonic version), in concepts like *umma al arabiya*, the Arab supernation, understood as a collective call from the entire Arab world. Which, of course, has not stood the test of time and has failed in its attempts to deal with the aforementioned concepts of fatherland or State (*watan* and *dawlat* respectively), as demonstrated by the successive failed attempts at building superstates, such as the UAR (United Arab Republic) in the fifties. Paradoxically, various factors have expressed this historical incapacity: in particular, the fact that the liberation of the current Arab countries was highly diverse: those in Africa freed themselves from the classic European coloni-

alism (by France, Britain, Italy and Spain) and in the Middle East they sought liberation from the Ottoman Empire, which reigned over them for almost five centuries! But this series of variables paved the way to a great variety of Arab political regimes that are much more "national-state patriots" than "pan-Arabists," with the added problem of multiple social or inter-state loyalties: clans, tribes, fragmented religious minorities. It is enough to ask the Lebanese, Syrians, Iraqis and Yemenites for their opinion to have a vague idea of the complexity of the problem.

Finally, we are witness to a fully regional transition, regardless of the variety of solutions that we can see in each individual case. Although not identical, the concept is similar to that of a classic political transition. In political science, there is a long and solid tradition in transition studies understood as a change of state political system (government in its wider sense), normally from authoritarian or dictatorial forms, to forms of conventional representative democracy. Transitions such as a regime change can and often do adopt different varieties and rhythms of consolidation.

The concept of regional transition goes beyond this and has another dimension. This is the case when several countries with geopolitical continuity enter into more or less simultaneous transitions, but do so for internal reasons specific to each of them. The last quarter of the 20th century was rich in regional transitions: those of southern Europe (Spain, Greece and Portugal in 1974/1975), those of the Latin American Southern Cone (Chile, Argentina and Uruguay between 1982 and 1990), and to an extent that of the post-Soviet Bloc, or Eastern Bloc (in the bipolar world), whose effects can still be felt today.

In these regional transitions, the internal dynamics, and its rhythms, are usually specific to each case and country, but often turn into transactional processes, based on negotiations between various actors, including some, such as the army or the judiciary (that are not secondary as such), from the previous regime, which are recycled and adapted to the new situation. And the cases in question include this kind of variable above all. That is to say, there will be more negotiated transitions than breakaway, triumphant revolutions. And there will be steps backward or the preservation of the status quo, as seems to be the case of Syria in June 2011, which has benefited additionally from two factors that distinguish it from Egypt and Libya respectively: on the one hand the army is not allowing the regime to fall, is dealing with the toughest part of the repression and – together with Egypt – is far and away the most powerful of all the Arab world. On the other hand, the international community adopted at the time a more cautious, more incrementalist and peaceful approach (in the Libyan case), for a group of variables that will keep the controversy open surrounding the so-called "double-standard" in the use of force when the Responsibility to Protect (known as R2P) is at stake. This unquestionable dilemma cannot be avoided.

The case of Libya deserves special attention, since this is an exception: the revolt has become a civil war with all its consequences, the confrontation has reached a stalemate and the new variable is the use of international military force, invoking the aforementioned R2P. Let us look at that in more detail.

The intervention ordered by the Security Council (SC) in Libya has given rise to much debate. On the one hand, it is a case in which large segments of the public opinion transmit a sense of confusion. It is one of the dilemmas of the so-called "duty to intervene" (in the nineties) or "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P: endorsed by the United Nations in 2005 and 2009). Dilemmas have arisen in each and every case that has led to international intervention under this invocation in exactly the last 20 years – disregarding the case of Iraq in 2003, since it is the only one in which the differences with Libya are so large that referring to it would be pointless.

The criteria of legality is officially non-objectionable: resolution 1973 of the SC (March 2011) is explicit, is prior to using force, clearly defines the mandate, and furthermore sets the limits that the mandate cannot pass. In this case, the criteria of legality is reinforced by the criteria of legitimacy. The cases that in the past have not received intervention, or in which it came late, like in the former Yugoslavia between 1991 and 1995, under the United Nations mission UNPROFOR, have heavily influenced the decision of the SC members. Even those who had their reservations – for various reasons for which they should answer – have abstained; there have been no votes against. The abstention of China and Russia is, therefore, a non-objection; and veto was within their power.

Resolution 1973 is clear: it aims to defend the Libyan people from the attacks of their own government, a mandate of articles 138 and 139 of the document referred to here. It aims to defend civilians – considered a basic Humanitarian International Right – and

specifically undertakes the so-called "Responsibility to Protect", defined by the 2005 International UN World Summit, and by the declaration of its Secretary General in 2009, who is calling for its "effective implementation." The SC says that it is acting under chapter 7 of the Charter (relative to the use of force) and is granting a double mandate. On the one hand the no-fly zone, which requires military means to be enforced and needs to be used to maintain the credibility of the Resolution, assuming Gaddafi makes it necessary. And he did so in the 48 hours following the United Nations Resolution. His forces were stopped 15 km from the centre of Benghazi and he has repeatedly violated his own ceasefire. But the specific mandate of Resolution 1973, aside from the no-fly zone, has another essential aspect: it authorises the use of the means necessary to defend the population when under threat from that force. It is not true to say there are no precedents. There are several, and furthermore their variety shows both its efficiency if done with resolve (protection of the Kurdish population in northern Iraq, with the 1991 no-fly zone, which was maintained for over 10 years with a high level of efficiency), and the human cost if it is not done in this manner (UNPROFOR in Bosnia Herzegovina or the failure to protect Shiites in southern Iraq in 1991). The resolution does not authorise and expressly vetoes any land invasion or deployment of troops with intentions to occupy. In the opinion of many experts, that does not imply that security perimeters cannot be created when ACNUR and other humanitarian agencies have to be deployed on the terrain, should the case arise. The Libyan crisis has caused an exodus towards the Tunisian and Egyptian borders of between 150,000 and 200,000 people, which is ten times higher than the exodus towards southern Europe in the same time. The return, repatriation or relocation of these people forms part of the humanitarian problem to be resolved.

The Resolution does not aim to fight against the territorial integrity of Libya, and does not call for regime change. It does not propose this and it is not within the powers of the SC to do so. When it comes to Security Council resolutions, the States decide for themselves whether or not and in what way to participate in the subsequent operations, which explains why the EU or even NATO (since it does not come under the Mutual Defence Pact of Art. 5) have no reason to take a common, collective position with these organisations.

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There is also the unequal treatement to consider, in particular in Yemen. (The same day that the Resolution was approved 50 demonstrators were killed in the capital alone.) The Arab League and the SC should follow the case very closely. This is a further dilemma: where are the limits for the SC? Yemen, Bahrain? The unequal treatement exists, and unfortunately there are a lot of them. All the dilemmas boil down to this: the international community, faced with this situation, has two options. The first is to not take action anywhere, thus avoiding unequal treatement, and wait for the time to act everywhere simultaneously, successfully resolving all situations in question. The other option is that the SC and the UN decide when and where it should and can act, with the appropriate mandate, sufficient means and a sufficient collective will, assuming the burden of all the dilemmas.

When all is said and done however, there is an overwhelming consensus on the overall phenomenon of change in the Arab world. Its origin was unpredictable, it has adopted diverse rhythms and forms in its development, there will be steps backwards in certain cases, but overall there has been a qualitative change and nothing will return to how it was before January 2011. That is how history progresses: in fits and starts, but unrelentingly moving onward.