Translational Research

Democratization and Stability in the Middle East
By Blago Tashev, PhD

The wave of popular unrest sweeping the Middle East in the last months has raised the hope that countries in the region will embrace democracy and the states will become more peaceful and prosperous. Yet neither democracy nor stable peace is certain in the region. Although democracy and peaceful stability tend to be associated,[i] the processes leading to consolidated democracy are both uncertain and volatile. In fact, the process of democratization almost universally leads to short- and medium-term instability and conflict. This piece offers some thoughts for considering the prospects for democratization and stability in the region.

On the prospects of democratization

Democracy is generally defined as a political order characterized by civil and political rights, free and fair regular elections open to multiple parties and all citizens, and an accountable and transparent government.[ii] There are multiple conditions and structures that can facilitate the transition to democracy. The list can be long, but some are essential, for example:
• political parties and groups representing a wide range of the citizens' interests;
• a military, political parties, and charismatic leaders either being unable or resisting the temptation to seek to monopolize power;
• a national identity broadly shared by the vast majority of the population;
• a level of economic development that excludes extreme poverty and deprivation among wide segments of society; and

The Egyptian Army and the Test of Democratic Transformation
By Basema Maki

In Egypt the Army has promised to turn over its authority to a civilian government. Parliamentary and presidential elections are to be held sometime between September and November 2011.[i] These will be the first elections following the era of former President Hosni Mubarak, who was overthrown in the Revolution of 25 January.

These elections are important because they will determine the future course of Egypt's political system. In question is whether the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces, which took power after the revolution, will fulfill its promise to stay neutral and deliver power to a civilian government – regardless of who is elected - and then withdraw to the barracks or continue to dominate the political process by supporting certain figures and parties over others, pushing them to the forefront to form a government, and remaining the real player behind the scenes.

Looking to modern Egyptian history for indications of how this could play out, there are signs that it could go either way. After the 1952 military coup that led to the overthrow of the Egyptian monarchy, the Army took control over Egyptian affairs, first directly during the rule of President Gamal Abdel Nasser, and then indirectly during the Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak periods. In fact the four presidents who followed the 1952 coup were all former military officers. The Abdel Nasser period was characterized by a strict military regime. Most key government positions were occupied by the military, and there were no elections or political parties with the exception of the ruling Socialist Union party.[ii] When Anwar Sadat came to power in 1970, one of the major steps he took was to reduce the military's grip on Egyptian government and society by allowing political parties to form. In addition he permitted the development of a free press.

Research Notes

14 July 2011

Dr. Wendy Chambers led a discussion at the Small Wars Discussion Group in Quantico, VA, on types of cultural knowledge and skills and how they are applicable across the range of military operations.

18 July 2011

Ms. Erika Tarzi and Ms. Kristin Post participated in the Enhanced Staff Ride (ESR) at Chancellorsville with the Marine Corps University's Command and Staff College to familiarize faculty with the ESR model prior to their using it with students.

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- a citizenry capable of self-organizing in civic, social, economic and political associations.

While other crucial factors may be enumerated, the important point is that an essential mix must be present for a country to have a chance of building a democracy.

Now that a transition has started in some Middle Eastern countries and others are on the verge, it is crucial to consider whether these countries will be able to change into democracies. In order to do this, one must assess the presence of the essential conditions. While it can plausibly be argued that Egypt, for example, exhibits a lively civil society with a tradition of self-organizing and activism along with a middle class open to entrepreneurship, the country also has a powerful military which has yet to prove its willingness to withdraw completely from politics. While the armed forces were instrumental in removing the leader of the old regime, it is yet unclear whether the military will let political groups determine the form and content of Egypt's political system and government.[iii] A lot can go wrong in the process of democratization. The military can continue to see itself as the most important political player, concerned with, above all, stability rather than democracy. The military can choose to remain ready to intervene and impose solutions to political crises rather than permit political parties to sort out conflict. In fact, social scientists have long observed that the process of democratic unraveling tends to be faster that the process of democratizing changes.

Other countries, too, have fundamental problems which make the emergence of democracy problematic. Lebanon and Iraq, for example, demonstrate the challenges the democratization process faces when parts of the population pin their allegiance to a clan, tribe, or religious community. Creating democracy in a country where the great majority does not broadly share a single national identity is almost impossible. Indeed, Lebanon is a good cautionary tale. Although in the last two decades the country has done many of the right things to build a democracy – holding regular elections, maintaining multi-party system, cultivating a lively civil society, addressing the welfare of its citizens – its consolidation is constantly eroded by political forces that exploit existing ethnic and religious differences among the population.

The challenges to democratization are diverse. In Yemen, the lack of an active civil society and political parties with appeal to broad sections of the society makes the emergence of a pluralistic political system a tall order. In Bahrain, it is the support provided by conservative Gulf states to the country's ruling elite that stalls democratization. In fact, each country in the Middle East faces a score of challenges rather than an overwhelming single obstacle.

On the prospects of stability

Obviously, democracy requires a long time to take root, and the verdict is still out on whether it will take hold in these countries. This brings into view another important consideration about the democratization process. The end of old regimes and the advent of democratization lead to extreme political volatility. While the old regimes tended to impose order through violence and control, the newly emerging orders still do not possess the institutions and norms to reconcile competing political interests. Historically, when there are no institutions to channel and respond to the economic, social and political demands of newly mobilized citizens, the political forces representing them clash violently on the streets.[iv] If conflicts cannot be addressed in democratic and legitimate institutions, they are addressed in the streets. Old governing institutions in the Middle East, used to dictating the economic, social and political order, are simply not suited to responding to mobilized populations demanding change. If the country is unable to quickly create institutions through which various conflicts can be peacefully negotiated, managed and settled, political violence in the short-run is certain to occur.

CAOCL Round Table on Civilian-Military Collaboration

By Vicky Jasparro and Kristin Post

On 18 May 2011, Ms. Kristin Post led a round table discussion at Marine Corps University to assess lessons learned from and explore ways to advance civilian-military collaboration. The event included 24 participants and 8 observers from various US Marine Corps organizations, the US Agency for International Development, the US Institute of Peace, academia, the Departments of Justice, State and Defense, and the Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute. The discussion coalesced around the following themes: the enduring need for civilian-military coordination beyond times of war; the clash of civilian versus military organizational structures/cultures and the lack of a common language; the differences in collaboration on the ground vs. in headquarters; and the need to shape collaboration around 'unity of purpose' rather than 'unity of command'.

The round table's goals were to capture key lessons and questions among practitioners and to consider next steps. Some options for future action include: adopting a case study approach to investigate one aspect of the civilian-military relationship for a white paper, article or working group; continuing informal networking among the participants; and providing guidance to Marine training efforts. A goal for all of involved organizations is to provide a coherent and effective capability in crisis situations. This two-hour discussion contributed to the broader effort throughout government and academia to improve civilian-military collaboration. Learning from history "off the field" through introspection and debate, collaboration, and networking, is likely to result in a higher rate of success "on the field."

Then, following in Sadat's footsteps, Mubarak moved to further cement civilian rule. However, during both the Sadat and Mubarak periods, the military continued to play an active role in Egyptian life. For example, it was common for retired officers to fill positions as governors and heads of local councils in many Egyptian cities.[iii] In addition, the Egyptian army enjoyed special economic privileges in sectors such as textiles, clothing, food, electronics, construction, tourism and energy.[iv]

On the other hand, there is the example of how the Egyptian army behaved during the January 25 Revolution. Throughout the uprising, the Egyptian army has appeared to remain relatively neutral, not raising arms against the protesters and interfering with their right to protest. In that light, it may be the most capable organization to manage the transition.[v] It is worth noting that in 1976, during the Sadat era, the U.S. military initiated what has developed into a strong relationship with the Egyptian army. In 1979, the two countries agreed that the U.S. would provide the Egyptian army with military training and aid worth $1.3 billion annually, and today Egypt is the second highest recipient of U.S. military aid after Israel. The scale and pervasive nature of U.S. influence over the decades likely had an impact on how the Egyptian army conducted itself during the January 25 Revolution. For the United States, this is an important measure of effectiveness of its investment in the relationship between its armed forces and the Egyptian military and of how integrated the U.S. military's lessons are into Egyptian military culture.

Traditionally, under such circumstances Arab armies have been more likely to attack protesters and crackdown on any opposition voices in favor of the regime in power. Consider events in Libya and Syria as current examples. The tendency has been to use force to impose a state of emergency, disable the constitution, dissolve all political parties and then take power in a coup. Yet by contrast, the Egyptian army remained neutral and acted responsibly during the recent protests.

After the protests, the Egyptian military's behavior was reflected in the positive attitudes of the Egyptian people. A Pew Research Center poll[vi] conducted between March 24 and April 7, 2011, found that the Egyptian army enjoyed unprecedented popularity among the people and that nine out of every ten Egyptians said that they were satisfied with the performance of Field Marshal Mohamed Hussein Tantawi, Mubarak's former defense minister and the current head of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. These results were corroborated in a similar survey conducted by the Institute for International Peace between March 9 and 20, 2011.[vii]

However, due to Egypt's history of military rule, especially during the Nasser period, some Egyptians still suspect that the military may be maneuvering to retain its grip on power under a civilian front. These suspicions have been heightened by recent reports[viii] of the army using force to break up demonstrations, and arresting, imprisoning and putting on trial as many as one thousand civilians, including bloggers, journalists, critics and peaceful protestors. In addition, the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces has been criticized for not bringing enough former regime officials to trial and for not moving quickly enough to transfer power to a civilian government.

Perhaps it is no surprise to see Egypt's military stumble during this period of political transition. After all, the traditional role of a military is not to govern and bring about political change, but rather to defend a country against external threats and assist civilian authorities when requested. The real test will come during and after the upcoming elections. Either the military will extract itself from political life and allow democratic processes to take hold, or it will continue to be an active player in the political system.

For now, there is no way to truly know the intentions of Egypt's military leaders or to determine whether they really intend to transfer power freely and fairly to a civilian government, whatever its makeup. However, because of the Egyptian people's continued insistence on achieving the democratic goals of the revolution, coupled with international pressure for political reform, all eyes will be on the Egyptian military to see which of the two historical trends it will follow. The path it chooses could set a tone for other countries in the region involved in significant governmental change.

Notes:

[i] The information in this *Dispatches* piece is current through 13 July 2011.

[ii] Tariq al-Bishry, *Democracy and the July 23 Rule, 1952-1970* (Arab Research Institute: Beirut, 1987).

[iii] Farouk Abdel-Khalek, "The Sin of Article 15 ... and How the Military Took Control of the Civil Service, Indictment Against the President." (Jaffe Center for Studies and Research: Cairo, 2008).

[iv] Stephen H. Gotowicki LTC, U.S. Army, "The Role of the Egyptian Military in Domestic Society," *Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS),* 1997. Available at http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Digital-Library/Publications/Detail/?ots591=0c54e3b3-1e9c-be1e-2c24-a6a8c7060233&lng=en&id=110173.

[v] Tewfik Aclimandos, "Egyptian Army: Defining a New Political and Societal Pact," *Al Jazeera* (24 February 2011). Available at http://www.aljazeera.net/mritems/streams/2011/2/24/ 1_1044099_1_51.pdf.

[vi] Pew Research Center, "Egyptians Embrace Revolt Leaders, Religious Parties and Military, As Well." Available at http://pewglobal.org/2011/04/25/ egyptians-embrace-revolt-leaders-religious-parties-and-military-as-well/.

[vii] Charney Research, "Egypt National Survey - Results." Available at http://www.swiftpage6.com/CampResource/2Y0UPYJDLTR07Z10/1/text.pdf.

[viii] Evan Hill, "Egypt's Crackdown Now Wears Camouflage," *Al Jazeera* (20 May 2011). Available at http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/features/2011/05/2011519172611166398.html. See also, Human Rights Watch, "Egypt: Human Rights Reform an Urgent Priority," *Human Rights Watch* (7 June 2011). Available at http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/06/07/egypt-human-rights-reform-urgent-priority.

The transition from an old regime to an uncertain new political regime affects not only domestic politics, but also international relations. While the old regime, regardless of its nature, had conducted predictable and consistent policies in the eyes of states in the region, even when these policies were not to their liking, the policies of the newly emerging regime are unknown. Furthermore, almost always, the international policies and politics of the new regime are bound to change frequently as competing domestic factions are able to exert influence over foreign policy. Thus, while the military in Egypt, still in control of the country, strives to maintain the basic tenets of existing foreign policies intact, there are already calls from newly empowered political groups for reorientation of Egypt's foreign policies. Similarly, unrest in Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria pose current and future challenges to existing relations with their neighbors and other states.

Political scientists have long observed that a transition from authoritarian regimes increases the likelihood of aggressive foreign policy behavior, including war making.[v] International conflicts are frequently used by domestic factions as tools of both diversion and mobilization. Old elites might seek international conflicts to divert public attention from the failings of the old regime and gather the nation round the flag. Newly emerging elites, for their part, might seek to mobilize the support of groups that embrace causes – protecting ethnic kin abroad, regaining territories lost in the past, etc – which can lead to confrontation with other states.

When a group of states experiences transition from old regimes at the same time, as is the case in the Middle East, the level of uncertainty increases as patterns of interaction between states are challenged and new ones are slow to emerge. States outside the region, too, see predictability vanish and have no choice but to redefine their interests and relationships with players in the region.

Implications for the future

So what does the future hold for the Middle East? Most likely years of heightened instability and unpredictability. Even before the current popular unrest, the region exhibited numerous conflicts and flashpoints – Israel's conflicts with its neighbors, the conflicts in Iraq and Lebanon, Iran's attempts to dominate in the region, among others. The transition in several countries simply adds yet another significant source of instability as states which used to present fairly predictable policies and behavior are now in an uncertain process of redefining not only domestic orders but also relationships and roles in the wider region. The transition to democracy, or to any other new form of government, is by nature uncertain, unpredictable, easily reversible, and generally quick to take turns, even violent turns. The stakes the international community has in the region are too high to ignore. Adopting a hands-off policy is not an option as the potential effects of any conflict are very significant not only for the states in the region. However, one must expect that uncertainty, unpredictability and high pace of change will further challenge the ability of outsiders to address conflicts effectively.

Notes:

[ii] It is an established empirical observation that consolidated democracies do not wage war against each other. Therefore, it is believed that the spread of democracy promotes world peace. See for example, Michael E. Brown, et al, *Debating the Democratic Peace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

[II] There is a large body of literature exploring issues of transition to democracy. For ongoing debates in this field see, among others, *Journal of Democracy*, available also online at http://www.journalofdemocracy.org.

[III] On the role of the Egyptian military after the fall of Mubarak, see Tarek Masoud, "The Road to (and From) Liberation Square," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (July 2011): 20-34.

[IV] Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (Yale University Press, 1968).

[V] See for example Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder, *Electing to Fight: Why Emerging Democracies Go to War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005).