

## **Taking stock of the Arab Spring: the 'light on the hill' is fading**

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The Arab Spring continues to roll out half a world away via our TV screens each night. Rodger Shanahan steps back from the daily coverage and takes stock of the historic movement, 18 months to the day after it began when Tunisian protester Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire. Shanahan assesses what the democratic harvest has been, compares eight key countries, and looks at how the movement has morphed over time ...

The initial enthusiasm for the Arab Spring has waned, as the early momentum for political change has given way to the hard slog of democracy building in those countries where regimes have fallen, and ongoing conflict where they have not. But even at this juncture one thing is clear — the Arab Spring is becoming less about the fulfilment of a popular desire for democratisation supported by other democracies, and more a confusing mix of non-democratic motivations: the preservation of monarchical rule in the Gulf, the reassertion of Sunni primacy in Syria, and the concomitant proxy battle with Iran to limit its influence in the region.

For the West in general and the United States in particular, the democratic attack and counter-attack has provided it with a challenging policy dilemma. In response to events in the region, Washington has had to determine how to conduct the delicate balancing act between promoting its values and protecting its interests in the Middle East. This invariably, and with good reason, attracts criticism for its hypocrisy in calling for regime change in autocratic countries such as Syria and Yemen while at the same time forging close alliances with other autocratic regimes such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

The mismatch between those regional states calling for regime change and their own political systems was noted by Iran's secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Saeed Jalili when he recently asked: "How can those who have never held an election in their country be advocates of democracy?"

It is not all bleak though for the Arab Spring, which began in December 2010. For the states of North Africa, the movement's standard bearers, the results to date give rise to some (very) cautious optimism. In Tunisia, the first of the autocratic dominoes to fall, elections have delivered a moderate Islamist government — but the country awaits a constitution to be drawn up and ratified before general elections are held in March next year. Libya, whose transition from autocratic rule was somewhat bloodier than Tunisia's, is also in the process of developing a new constitution, but already its first elected law-making body has a strong showing of Islamists.

In Egypt the newly elected Islamist President Morsi has the multiple challenges of trying to make Islamism a mainstream Arab political phenomena at the same time as reducing the influence of the Army in order to allow real power to rest in the hands of elected representatives.

It is too early to tell whether these states will be able to build on their gains in the long term, but the reality is that the Maghreb, or the western part of the Arab world, is of limited influence in the broader Middle East. It is the periphery in terms of its geography and influence.

What happens in Egypt matters of course; its economic, demographic and military strength, along with its rich history of intellectual thought, means that it was for a long time the most influential of the Arab states. That influence has waned, although it is still the case that what happens in Egypt matters in the Arab world. A successful democratic transition in that country could act as an exemplar for other parts of the Arab world.

But for each gain that has been made, there are others where moves towards democratic reforms have been stymied. This has occurred most markedly in the Gulf states whose rulers, initially taken by surprise, have subsequently reacted aggressively by reinforcing the political primacy of Sunni rulers. Anti-government protests or political activity is normally blamed on "foreign powers", which is code for Iran and, more often than not, simply a means by which the autocratic regimes justify their continued unwillingness to countenance democratic reforms.

In Bahrain, not only has the minority Sunni ruling class refused to undertake any meaningful political reform, but Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates dispatched military and para-military forces to the island kingdom in order to assist the regime to quell political protests initiated largely by its Shi'a majority.

Saudi Arabia has also seen unrest among its restive Shi'a minority in the Eastern Province who have taken part in what the Shi'a call protests and the Saudi authorities refer to as riots. In neighbouring UAE, a country whose liberal social policies have endeared it to the West, the crackdown on dissent has been harsh, with the detention without charge of political activists, including those plotting to overthrow the ruling family through that most pernicious of weapons — the blog.

Events in Syria provide a different outlook altogether. If Tunisia represented a genuinely popular rebellion against an autocratic ruler whose outcome was of limited regional (let alone geopolitical) importance, then Syria represents the other end of the spectrum. A pivotal state, what happens in Syria matters a great deal in its neighbours, but the Assad regime's close alliance with Iran has meant that what largely began as a popular domestic rebellion has morphed into a messy blancmange pitting Shi'a interests against Sunni, pro-Assad states against anti-Assad states, and Western states seeking the overthrow of the Assad regime against Russia seeking to preserve it, and China wishing the problem would go away. Accusations abound, with some evidence, that al-Qaeda has entered the fray to help overthrow the rafidun (dissenter) Alawite regime, while counter-claims assert that Lebanon's Hezbollah is working to buttress the government.

Unfortunately, as much as the initial enthusiasm for democratic change in the Arab world was fired by the actions of the (largely) youthful protesters in the Western Arab world, more recent events have muddied the waters. The fall of regimes in the Maghreb came about largely through popular will, had no sectarian dimension involved and did not serve as the arena for big power rivalries to be played out. The further east the popular will for change has moved, however, the less successful it has been. In Bahrain the West stood by while a recalcitrant Sunni minority continued to deny equal political or civil rights to its Shi'a majority, and in Syria the West is lining up with autocratic Sunni rulers to overturn a repressive Alawite minority regime who are desperately clinging to power.

The longer the slaughter continues in Syria, the less inclined people will be to countenance regime change in other autocratic regimes. It is one of the great anomalies of the Arab Spring that the "shining light on the hill" of the United States has burnt less brightly the longer the crisis has gone on. By maintaining such a close alliance with autocratic Gulf states it has lessened its moral impact and, as a consequence its leadership. If the strongest power and leading democracy in the world acts decisively to help popular movements remove some autocratic rulers in the Arab world, and yet forges close alliances with other autocrats, then it becomes simply another transactional player in the region. The Arab Spring deserves more.

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