

Who will reshape the Arab world: its people, or the US?

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Phase one of the Arab spring is over. Phase two - the attempt to crush or contain genuine popular movements - has begun.

The patchwork political landscape of the Arab world – the client monarchies, degenerated nationalist dictatorships and the imperial petrol stations known as the Gulf states – was the outcome of an intensive experience of Anglo-French colonialism. This was followed after the second world war by a complex process of imperial transition to the United States. The result was a radical anticolonial Arab nationalism and Zionist expansionism within the wider framework of the cold war.

When the cold war ended Washington took charge of the region, initially through local potentates then through military bases and direct occupation. Democracy never entered the frame, enabling the Israelis to boast that they alone were an oasis of light in the heart of Arab darkness. How has all this been affected by the Arab intifada that began four months ago?

In January, Arab streets resounded to the slogan that united the masses regardless of class or creed: “Al-Sha’b yurid isquat al-nizam!” – “The people want the downfall of the regime!” The images streaming out from Tunis to Cairo, Saana to Bahrain, are of Arab peoples on their feet once again. On 14 January, as chanting crowds converged on the ministry of interior, Tunisia’s President Ben Ali and his family fled to Saudi Arabia. On 11 February the national uprising in Egypt toppled the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak as mass rebellion erupted in Libya and the Yemen.

In occupied Iraq, demonstrators protested against the corruption of the Maliki regime and, more recently, against the presence of US troops and bases. Jordan was shaken by nationwide strikes and tribal rebellion. Protests in Bahrain spiralled into calls for the overthrow of the monarchy, an event that scared the neighbouring Saudi kleptocrats and their western patrons, who can’t conceive of an Arabia without sultans. Even as I write, the corrupt and brutal Ba’athist outfit in Syria, under siege by its own people, is struggling for its life.

The dual determinants of the uprisings were both economic – with mass unemployment, rising prices, scarcity of essential commodities – and political: cronyism, corruption, repression, torture. Egypt and Saudi Arabia were the crucial pillars of US strategy in the region, as confirmed recently by US vice-president Jo Biden, who stated that he was more concerned about Egypt than Libya. The worry here is Israel; the fear that an out-of-control democratic government might renege on the peace treaty. And Washington has, for the time being, succeeded in rerouting the political process into a carefully orchestrated change, led by Mubarak’s defence minister and chief of staff, the latter being particularly close to the Americans.

Most of the regime is still in place. Its key messages are the need for stability and a return to work, putting a stop to the strike wave. Fevered behind-the-scenes negotiations between Washington and the Muslim Brotherhood are continuing. A slightly amended old constitution remains in force and

the South American model of huge social movements producing new political organisations that triumph at the polls and institute social reforms is far from being replicated in the Arab world, thus not posing any serious challenge, until now, to the economic status quo.

The mass movement remains alert in both Tunisia and Egypt but is short of political instruments that reflect the general will. The first phase is over. The second, that of rolling back the movements, has begun.

The Nato bombing of Libya was an attempt by the west to regain the “democratic” initiative after its dictators were toppled elsewhere. It has made the situation worse. The so-called pre-empting of a massacre has led to the killing of hundreds of soldiers, many of whom were fighting under duress, and permitted the ghastly Muammar Gaddafi to masquerade as an anti-imperialist.

Here one has to say that whatever the final outcome, the Libyan people have lost. The country will either be partitioned into a Gaddafi state and a squalid pro-west protectorate led by selected businessmen, or the west will take out Gaddafi and control the whole of Libya and its huge oil reserves. This display of affection for “democracy” does not extend elsewhere in the region.

In Bahrain, the US green-lighted a Saudi intervention to crush local democrats, enhance religious sectarianism, organise secret trials and sentence protesters to death. Bahrain today is a prison camp, a poisonous mixture of Guantánamo and Saudi Arabia.

In Syria the security apparatus led by the Assad family is killing at will, but without being able to crush the democratic movement. The opposition is not under the control of Islamists: it is a broad coalition that includes every social layer apart from the capitalist class that remains loyal to the regime.

Unlike in other Arab countries, many Syrian intellectuals stayed at home, suffering prison and torture, and secular socialists like Riad Turk and many others are part of the underground leadership in Damascus and Aleppo. Nobody wants western military intervention. They don't want a repeat of Iraq or Libya. The Israelis and the US would prefer Assad to stay as they once did Mubarak, but the dice are still in the air.

In Yemen, the despot has killed hundreds of citizens but the army has split, and Americans and Saudis are trying desperately to stitch together a new coalition (as in Egypt) – but the mass movement is resisting any deals with the incumbent.

The US has to contend with an altered political environment in the Arab world. It is too soon to predict the final outcome, except to say it is not over yet.

P.S.

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<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/apr/29/arab-politics-democracy-intervention>