

OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

Aftermath of Revolution

By Michael Albertus and Victor Menaldo

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The recent assassination of a leading secular opposition figure in Tunisia has cast a dark cloud on what many had hoped would serve as a model for democratic transition in countries swept by the Arab Spring. The sad fact is that many revolutions lead to renewed dictatorships. But the good news is that even a rocky and prolonged transition can produce stable democracy.

Sparked in Tunisia in 2010, the revolutions and popular protests that have come to define the Arab Spring spread rapidly across the Middle East and North Africa, challenging entrenched autocratic regimes and conjuring comparisons to the fall of the Berlin Wall. For many, the spread of freedom and democracy seemed inevitable.

Yet Syria's bloody civil war continues to drag on, while President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood attempt to institutionalize an old-fashioned power grab in Egypt. In Tunisia, the ruling Islamist party, Ennahda, has ridden roughshod over secularists. President Moncef Marzouki's center-left secular party, Congress for the Republic, quit Tunisia's coalition government on Feb. 10 following massive protests.

Alas, there is considerable precedent for these setbacks. Most revolutions simply replace one autocratic government with another.

Since the end of World War II, there have been roughly 50 major revolutions that have either toppled autocratic regimes or led to significant political reform in "flawed" democracies. For those revolutions that have occurred under dictatorships, only about a third have resulted in transitions to democracy.

Two infamous cases that might raise some alarm bells about the Middle East today are the theocracy that followed Iran's 1979 revolution, and the "republican" dictatorships of Anwar Sadat and Hosni Mubarak after Egypt's 1952 revolution. Similarly, the checkered political histories of post-revolutionary China, Cuba, Mexico and Russia might make even the most fervent revolutionaries take pause.

Still, the minority of the democracies that have managed to emerge in the aftermath of their revolutionary ferment provide cause for optimism. Less than a handful of those revolutionary transitions have reverted back to dictatorship. For every Kyrgyzstan, where there has been autocratic backsliding since the Tulip Revolution, there are a dozen examples of democracies that have arisen in the wake of revolution — including surprises such as the Philippines.

While democracies that emerge from revolution are typically stable, this does not mean that the transition process is rapid or seamless. As England's post-Glorious Revolution period indicates, progress toward full democracy can be protracted. The 1688 Revolution set the stage for gradual expansions of the franchise in 1832, 1867 and 1884, which ultimately led to universal suffrage in 1928.

It may also face a number of potential pitfalls along the way. The cycling between democracy and dictatorship that characterize countries with contested transitions, such as Argentina, France, Peru or Thailand, is far from exceptional.

The worst case scenario is a return to full-fledged dictatorship, as occurred after the French Revolution, or in Sudan shortly after independence. Morocco is at risk of this outcome.

Less perniciously, fits and starts may prolong the transition period and present opportunities for "spoilers" to derail progress. The infighting in Libya is an example. Lastly, the adoption of nominally democratic institutions may fail to benefit the majority of citizens and even foster one-party rule, an outcome South Africa faces today.

The more promising cases from the Arab Spring, such as Tunisia and Egypt, fall into this last category. In both countries, a mix of formerly powerful elites and ascendant new elites are scrambling to game the political structure to protect their interests, meanwhile tabling policies that could otherwise benefit the majority of citizens.

In Egypt, the military has won immunity from prosecution and autonomy over its budget, while Morsi has at times reverted to Mubarak-era emergency rule to quell popular unrest. In Tunisia, the security apparatus under former dictator Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali remains entrenched in the government, while Ennahda has selectively repressed protests as it turns a blind eye to crimes perpetrated by hard-line Islamists against Tunisia's secular middle class.

To avoid reversion to autocracy or stalled, impartial democracy, a country in Tunisia's or Egypt's circumstances must steer between the Scylla of outsized influence by erstwhile autocratic incumbents and the Charybdis of unconstrained new actors who seek to lock in newfound power.

As with all revolutions, to remain on a trajectory toward democracy requires continued popular pressure on all those with the capacity to hijack democratic aspirations. This suggests that street protests in these countries are far from over. In the long term, this instability may pay off in the form of democracy.

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