



MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

Middle East Institute, National University of Singapore

STREET MOB DEMOCRACY: THE OFFSPRING OF THE 'ARAB SPRING'?

BY AMEEN TALIB

The 'Arab Spring' brought enthusiasm and hope in the Middle East that corrupt despot leaders will be toppled; and the optimists in the Arab World were anticipating that an offspring of the 'Arab Spring' would be the eradication (or at least the diminishing) of corruption in the Arab world. This has yet to materialise and that offspring is not only an infant but still in the incubator. The main expected offspring was the birth of democracy in the Arab world and the accompanying people power; at least in having a voice and right to participate in choosing their leaders. The current events in Egypt seem to suggest that the citizenry are expressing their voice and people power not necessarily via the election ballots but through the street demonstrations.

Egypt had a democratic presidential election one year ago (June 2012) and after 12 months of elected presidency rule in Egypt, the military has intervened to resume power. There has been opposition to Mohammed Mursi; the elected Egyptian president. Street demonstrations swept the whole of Egypt against the Mursi regime. The Egyptian military gave (President) Mursi a 48 hour ultimatum to share power with the opposition which Mursi rejected. The Army removed Mursi and appointed the constitutional court chief Justice Adly Mansour as interim President. The popular view has been that it was a military coup, however there is a view that it is not a military coup but a military intervention to ensure the security and stability of the country. The military saw it as responding to the demands of the public.

Mursi was an elected president through ballot and voting democracy. His performance as president was met by public resentment for various reasons; including the deteriorating

economy and the perceived consolidation of power in the hands of the Muslim Brotherhood. Present day mainstream constitutional democracy demands that an elected president is only removed through an election process or by the people's assembly (parliament) through a constitutional process. The contemporary democracy *modus operandi* has been the use of street protests/demonstrations to apply pressure on the people's assembly to start the process of "vote of no confidence" or to apply pressure on the executive (government) to call for early election.

The opposition in Egypt used street mob protest and the military to remove the elected president. As a large number of the public were dissatisfied with Mursi, street demonstrations were organized which resulted in removing the elected president. It is not uncommon for opposition supporters to hold public street demonstration as a rejection of ballot democracy results. This has recently occurred in Malaysia.

Are such events anti-democracy or are they 'new age democracy'? Public protests in different forms have been common for a long time. Protesters normally have specific demands of the government; protests are rarely for removing an elected president. Street protests are a common tool for removing dictators and/or non-elected presidents. When they are used in democratic countries to remove presidents they can be called 'street mob democracy' as an alternative to 'ballot democracy'. An essential element for 'street mob democracy' to work is the support of the military.

A problem is when the 'street mob democracy' demonstrations accelerate to a level that cripples the nation and/or threatens the nation's security. The military institution has traditionally been responsible for the nation's security and the people's safety. They are often faced with the dilemma of how to react. If the military does not intervene, the nation can suffer and street violence may erupt if opposing factions clash. There is also a risk of anarchy spreading. If the military uses its military power to protect the regime, then it faces the backlash of turning against its own citizens. This could lead to a divide in the army resulting in defectors as occurred in Libya, Syria and Yemen. This in most cases results in violence and/or civil war.

The Egyptian military chose to support the street mob protests and enforce the regime change in the name of public demand. Conventional constitutional democracy measures public demands by the election ballot results. Street mob protests size as a proxy measure for public demand could be misleading. It is a gauge for the well organised vocal segment of

the opposition. The potential error is the size and views of the populace that does not partake in the street protests. To regard street mob protests as 'Street Democracy' and a proxy for election can be dangerous and (democratically) fatal. It could create an alternative pathway for the 'losers' in a democratic election process. Even more worrying is the fact that this pathway is only plausible with the military support; hence the military would change elected regimes in the name of democracy.

The debate will linger on whether the Egyptian military should intervene in politics and whether the current events was a military coup or merely an intervention in response to public demands. One must also not forget that it was the military in Egypt that created the republic in the 1952 removal of the king and appointing General Muhammed Naguib as president and the country has been under military rule until Mursi's regime. It is (somewhat) normal for many Egyptians to see the military as the country leaders. They are seen as the defenders of the public.

The issue here that is disturbing everyone is the question of what happens if the majority in Egypt actually want Mursi as a leader, as was evident in the election results. That uncertainty is traditionally resolved by calling early elections. The popular view in the streets of Egypt is that if election is held today the Muslim Brotherhood is likely to win it again. The Egyptian military have derailed the democratic process in Egypt. They can still salvage Egyptian democracy by calling for an election within 12 months. The intervention is reasonable for security reasons. The current arrests of some Muslim Brotherhood leaders makes the military look prejudice against the Muslim Brotherhood. One hopes that the Muslim Brotherhood will not be banned from running for the next elections. The early signs are not promising. The Muslim Brotherhood demonstrators were dispersed by force resulting in the death of hundreds. Emergency laws have been declared and a dusk to dawn curfew imposed. A risk the country is facing in the next few days is the possible backlash from the Muslim Brotherhood supporters. The other potential risk is these recent events might lead to the militant supporters of Muslim Brotherhood going underground inciting violence and 'armed' struggle via guerrilla warfare and acts of violence.

The military needs to have an interim government that is reconciliatory and as widely accepted as possible. The choice of El-Baradei as Prime Minister though seems a logical one, is a wrong one (at least for now). He is not well received by many Egyptians, especially the Islamists and the lower income. The Salafist El-Nur party has already rejected El-Baradei as Prime Minister. The appointment of El-Baradei as prime Minister will only fuel

the conspiracy theory advocates as he is widely regarded in Egypt as the choice of the West. A technocrat interim cabinet might be the ideal solution at this time.

The military is sensitive to the possibility that recent events turn into secularism versus Islamism. They are trying to ensure that El-Nour Islamic party support the interim government. It will be a disaster if El-Nour party ceases supporting the interim government. El-Nour has already blocked the appointment of El-Baradei as Prime Minister. The military brokered a deal appointing El-Baradei as Vice President. This has made the military appear to have political party/ideology biasness. The sceptical fear the interim president will resign in the near future and El-Baradei will become president. The military crackdown on the Mursi-supporters demonstration sit-in resulting in hundreds of fatal casualties has prompted international condemnation. El-Baradei has resigned as Vice President.

The constitution has to be finalised. Elections for the Assembly house(s) needs to be held on urgent basis so that the Assembly House can act as the check and balance. A date for the presidential election needs to be set and adhered to. The interim government needs to regain the citizenry faith in the economy and the road map not just for the democratic process but also for the economic solutions and development. Egypt's tourism industry is crucial for the economy, in particular for the informal sector. The country needs to display security for tourists. The road ahead is not smooth and the expectations of the public need to be addressed.

A major issue arising from the Egypt crisis for the international community and especially the Arab world, is that the events has legitimized 'Street Mob Democracy'. It has displayed that in democracies change in leadership does not have to be by the election box but a new age democracy is 'Street Mob Democracy'. Is this the offspring of the 'Arab Spring'?

Dr Ameen Talib is a Board Member of the Middle East Institute of the National University of Singapore and Chairman of the Research Institute for Malay and Islamic Affairs (RIMA).