

MIDDLE EAST INSIGHTS

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THE PROBLEM OF NATIONAL DIALOGUE IN THE ARAB SPRING

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It is quite perplexing that many have called the recent Tunisian uprising the “Jasmine Revolution.” That is because Tunisians associate that name with the coup that brought the now-ousted president, Zayn al-‘Abidine Bin ‘Ali, to power in 1987. That Jasmine Revolution was not a revolution of any sorts, but rather a personnel change within the ruling party. After uniting to expel the corrupt president Habib Bourguiba, parties and citizens alike accepted a “national dialogue,” by which Bin ‘Ali promised wide-ranging political reform. Yet the changes Tunisians had hoped for never came. After failing to eradicate vestiges of the old government, Bin ‘Ali ruled over Tunisia for 23 years through a mix of crony capitalism and iron-fisted coercion.

Tunisians did not forget this in 2011. They protested tirelessly against any form of regime-led negotiation, and when their primary objective was achieved (i.e., getting Bin ‘Ali out of power), they did not stop until all members of the old regime were purged and the ruling party was dissolved. Egyptians are currently enmeshed in a similar process, coming to the streets in droves to demand the removal of all Mubarak remnants.

In the more protracted cases of the Arab Spring (Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria), the regimes are proving to be more stubborn and reckless than their fallen counterparts. At the same time, the embattled leaders--namely King Hamad in Bahrain and President Asad in Syria--have recently been pressing for “national dialogue,” a route by which they will remain central to any settlement. In this national dialogue, they hope to reverse the crisis that challenges their power base by talking a big game of reform and inviting those that will actually play into it (i.e., regime supporters, soft opposition members, moderate dissidents and ambivalent parties). International and regional powers apparently favor this kind of regime-led dialogue, while protestors equate it with letting the bullies hijack the people’s revolution. It may be understandable that many have forgotten Tunisia 1987. But have we already let escape from memory the course of the 2011 Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings and the importance of the refusal to negotiate in these successful overthrows?

I borrow the term “restabilization” from Jason Brownlee to suggest that “national dialogue” is merely a way for the regime to ensure its sole objective: survival. Two-way reconciliation might look like the only available option to international and regional governments who prioritize stability, but a clearer understanding of the case-by-case dynamics of conflict termination (in Tunisia and Egypt) and intractability (in Yemen, Bahrain, Libya and Syria) illustrate that regime-led national dialogue is little more than a façade. In other words, this type of dialogue does not strive for meaningful change -- it is a tactic aimed at restabilization.

Conflict termination and intractability in the Arab Spring

The Arab Spring caught everyone by surprise, especially the authoritarians themselves. Bin ‘Ali and Mubarak were on their heels from the beginning, mobilizing their personal security forces to crackdown on protestors. Yet the national armies--with a limited, but nevertheless crucial institutional distance from the core leadership--were not keen on the ‘shoot to kill’ directive. Consequently, when the armies did not participate directly in the regime brutalities, Bin ‘Ali and Mubarak stood on ever-shrinking islands.

Whether the regime heads chose flight, or the decision was made for them by elements in their inner circles, these conflicts did not become protracted. The shock and intensity of unprecedented protest mobilization, communication breakdown between regime and army, and the non-interference of outsiders left those leaders without recourse. The conflicts terminated relatively easily (not to take lightly the deaths of over 1,000 combined in Tunisia and Egypt), as protestors continued to work against any negotiation with remaining regime loyalists.

These conflict traits--low intensity and short duration--however, were not reproduced in the later developing contexts. Saleh, al-Khalifa, Qaddafi and Asad could learn by example, assessing the tactical “mistakes” of Bin ‘Ali and Mubarak. Their lessons learnt could be consolidated with the backing of loyal armies and security forces closely linked to them by impenetrable family or clan ties. The autocrats also have been given more time to retain some backers (both domestically and internationally) through evoking particular sentiments, whether they are the sectarian, counter-terrorism or regional security ones. These key characteristics have in part made the dynamics of the remaining cases much more violent and intractable.

With more time, entrenched zero-sum positions have congealed, and it is likely that neither side will budge -- a mainstay of conflict intractability. With the dictators’ actions increasing in bellicosity each week, the protestors contend that the status quo cannot be reinstated. The opposite side is no different in their unwavering position: Saleh has rejected GCC initiatives time after time, Qaddafi has brushed off attempts by regional powers (like Turkey) to protect him, and Asad has been unmoving in the face of growing isolation from his neighbors. This is not necessarily because they have gone mad, but because they perceive any step towards outside-led reconciliation as regime suicide. Their regime structures, like many in the region, have evolved to consolidate their own survival. These cemented positions on both sides normalize conflict, making any concessions virtually impossible.

National Dialogue: little more than farce?

Or is there actually another way out for these dictators? The rulers of Syria and Bahrain seem to perceive one: national dialogue. This process is the most developed in Bahrain. Kicked off in early-July by King Hamad himself, this dialogue was applauded by outside powers, as sessions were organized to discuss issues ranging from political rights to economic policy. Over 90% of the 300 invitees participated in the sessions. However, the King’s choice of conservative MP Khalifa al-Dhahrani to head the national dialogue (instead of the more reform minded Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad) is suspect. Further, the structure of the dialogue--which only offered approximately 10% of the seats to opposition members--purposefully gives little to no leverage to those who protested for systemic change back in February and March in Pearl Square.

In Syria, a similar process was [launched by the Asad regime in mid-July](#). Regime loyalists and moderate dissidents alike attended two days of dialogue meetings. On the surface things looked promising, as almost 200 individuals were permitted to speak critically of the brutal regime crackdown. However, how to enact even a working plan of political reform was not a topic of conversation. The head of the dialogue and vice president to Asad, Farouq al-Shara, simply declared that this exact type of dialogue represented the only way out of the crisis. Indeed, this process appears to be a planned regime tactic, as Asad opened the safety valve for moderates’ frustrations and implicitly reassured regime supporters that all is not lost.

These two endeavors demonstrate that regime-led initiatives for the sake of “dialogue” merely allow those who have committed such egregious acts of violence against their people to dictate the course of policy making going forward. This process has not commenced for the beleaguered regime heads of Yemen and Libya quite yet, but Saleh and Qaddafi have insinuated through their stubborn actions that the violence in their countries will remain protracted until a regime-led platform for settlement is accepted wholesale. This unwavering stance is meant to ensure their families can stick around in some institutional capacity, even if the clock has struck for them personally.

Therefore, national dialogue is little more than a disguise for restabilization. It is an attempt to merely offer (or just talk about) cosmetic reforms that will allow for the regimes to stay in power, if not strengthen their mandates. Many protestors and ardent oppositional parties have worked to uncover this plot, insisting that anything short of regime abdication and ruling party disbandment will return the political game to ‘business as usual.’

The only outlier is Bahrain. It is true that the largest opposition party [al-Wefaq withdrew from the national dialogue two weeks ago](#) because their demands were falling on deaf ears. Yet they were not calling for regime abdication, but moderate reform to the political system. Without countrywide and relentless contestation of the dialogue as is, it appears that the meetings will survive without the participation of al-Wefaq. In fact, with the submission of limited reforms through the dialogue--like the [one stamped by the remaining regime supporters of the dialogue and approved by King Hamad](#) that gives the lower elected chamber of parliament more persuasive power, but not the right to pass legislation--restabilization remains a possibility.

A shift in external policy

As with Bahrain, key players in the international community appear to be favoring the regime-led political settlement in the other outstanding cases. US counter-terrorism chief John Brennan’s visit to Yemen in mid-July, which included little successful deliberation with protest coalitions or oppositional parties, suggests that the US could continue to invest in the Saleh family as the key to an open attack policy against al-Qaeda. While [the UK was the most recent addition to the growing list of official rebel supporters](#), Foreign Secretary William Hague and his French counterpart Alain Juppé [still insist any political settlement stipulates that Qaddafi remain in Libya](#). That stance gives the biggest possible spoilers (i.e., perhaps Qaddafi himself, and more likely, his family members and close confidants) a say in the negotiation process. And even though the US and France have been more vocally irritated with Asad since their [embassies were attacked by regime supporters](#), their governments and an odd set of colliding powerhouses (i.e., Iran, Israel, China and Russia) are loath to lose Asad as a central component of regional security.

National dialogue might appear to be in the interests of these outside powers, as emerging or continuing armed conflicts in these countries jeopardize geostrategic security and global capitalist flows. However, an ambiguous stance (i.e., ‘we are with the protestors...but not exactly against the regime’), with regime-led dialogue as its symbol will only increase the likelihood of conflict intractability. That is because the chief beneficiary of such regime-led dialogue is the system it aims to restabilize. If those who protested for change perceive that domestic brutalities and outside sponsorship of continued transgressions leaves them few options for change, they may resort to more desperate measures, including participating in or continuing armed insurrection. It is that outcome that will truly strike a blow to the geostrategic interests of powers inside and outside the region.

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