

“Bloody Autocracy, Religious Kleptocracy, Unstable Democracy: In Search of Better Choices for the Middle East (and Beyond).”

The adage “be careful what you wish for” has perhaps never been as apt as it is in the post-Spring Arab world. For the international community, losing the unsavory but ultimately predictable autocrats like Hosni Mubarak and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali has been utterly disorienting. Bereft of the coercive powers of the dictator to deliver on the preferred international agenda and left to the vagaries of an increasingly assertive Arab public opinion, diplomats are left in search of tools that simply do not exist.

The Arab Spring took most by surprise, not least the demonstrators themselves. Wholly unprepared to negotiate with the remnants of the state, run in elections or govern, the youth of the streets were quickly outmaneuvered by religious parties that had spent years waiting for their moment.

The Muslim Brotherhood affiliated parties, long regarded as “cleaner” than their secular counterparts, turned out to be avaricious in power. Exuding political ambition, the Brotherhood, especially in Egypt, moved immediately to consolidate authority, eschewing the coalition politics that are helping their Tunisian counterpart, Ennahda, to put on a better public face. But the youth of the street protests and the Brotherhood alike underestimated the resilience of the “deep state” - the elites and institutions that benefitted from decades of impunity afforded by entrenched autocracy.

The international community, for its part, has been wholly unable to adapt to a region where popular passion now matters more than cozy pacts with corrupt dictators. Slow to embrace the changes demanded by the street and completely lacking knowledge of the new players, most foreign governments have adopted a wait and see posture to the changes roiling the Arab world. Perhaps emboldened by the ambivalence of the international community, Bahrain, aided by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, violently ended street protests in their capital, Manama. In Syria, Bashar Al Assad, seemingly down for the count in 2012, resuscitated his dying regime with Russian assistance. Egypt’s military, egged on by the deep state, ousted the country’s first freely elected president almost guaranteeing that the Islamists will move underground and perhaps trade politics for violence.

Faced with this unholy mess, international (and some domestic) cries are growing louder to turn back the clock – witness the muted international reaction to the military coup in Egypt and the acquiescence to Bahrain’s repression of the Shia majority in that country. Even where political transitions have taken weak hold – Tunisia, Libya, Yemen -- there are murmurs that the old status quo was better than the new normal of barely controlled chaos. While few will say it out loud, some international affairs practitioners wonder if the ruthless Bashar al Assad is preferable to what might come next.

As comforting as the thought might be, turning back the clock is neither possible nor advisable. The world is witnessing the mass empowerment of populations long repressed but left without any functioning political institutions to respond to the demands of the street. Change will be messy but it is inevitable and far preferable to the false stability afforded by one man and one party states. The conundrum is that the Arab Spring countries, unlike Eastern Europe post-Iron-Curtain, start with almost no democratic experience or collective memory of anything other than authoritarianism.

The alternatives to autocracy and instability in the Arab world are relatively obvious but the deep state will resist change and the international community lacks the will to back the Arab public's demand for reform. Years of repression have destroyed any vestige of a democratic middle and there are few viable liberal, democratic political forces to articulate a vision between dictatorship and religious hegemony. Local government – one of the keys to empowering minority communities and reducing tribal and sectarian conflict -- is underdeveloped. Justice systems are viewed as captured by the old ruling class at best, corrupt at worst. Property rights, land registries, contract law and the other building blocks of a liberal economic system are dysfunctional or non-existent.

Egypt's military seems determined to resist any kind of democratic best practice but after false starts and mistakes, Yemen, Tunisia and Libya have all embraced some form of dialogue and public consensus seeking. Absent the deep legitimacy created by multiple iterations of elections, the dialogue process may allow reforms to go forward – not necessarily with the enthusiastic support of the entire country but with sufficient consensus to withstand most challenges. Dialogue is also a comfortable entry point for the international community which can be supportive of change without interfering in politics. Only when consensus emerges can the long hard work of institution building begin.