

Revolutionary Patience

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MADRID – On December 17, 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself alight in Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia. Within weeks, the popular revolt triggered by Bouazizi's act had spread far beyond Tunisia, engulfing much of the Arab world.

In Europe, Ukraine and other troubled countries, such as Bosnia, began their long and still incomplete transitions to democracy a quarter-century ago. The Arab world, by contrast, has logged a mere three years of transition – the blink of an eye in historical terms. Still, there have already been significant changes, and the region is advancing – though the destination remains unknown. As in other parts of the world, Arab countries need time to attain the democracy and pluralism their peoples seek. They will achieve their goals – but not in a mere three years.

In fact, events in today's Middle East continue to be shaped by the radical changes brought about after World War I. Previously, most Arabs had been grouped together under various caliphates. After the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire in 1923, two nation-states (Iran and Turkey) emerged, while the Arabs were distributed among 22 new countries, generally under British or French colonial domination.

Once the colonies had achieved independence – Saudi Arabia, today a Sunni regional power, was created in 1932 – a new attempt was made to unite the Arab nation by means of the political Islam that emerged in the 1920's in response to the fall of the Ottoman Caliphate. The phenomenon took many forms, including the Muslim Brotherhood, founded in 1928. At the same time, efforts at nation-building along secular lines were reflected in Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser's pan-Arabism and the Syrian Baath Party, resulting in the establishment of the United Arab Republic, a union between Egypt and Syria that lasted from 1958 to 1961.

A half-century later, the simultaneous revolts in the Arab world were the result of neither political tendency, instead reflecting broad popular rejection of dysfunctional and corrupt authoritarian governments. But, with Syria immersed in a brutal civil

war that has claimed more than 130,000 lives already, Libya on the verge of collapse, and Egypt returning power to the army and proscribing the Muslim Brotherhood, Tunisia has been the only success.

Tunisia adopted its new constitution on January 27, thus clearing the way for what will be the most secular and fairest elections in any of the region's countries. The new constitution is the most modern in the Arab world, the fruit of a non-violent transition. With a small, well-educated population, Tunisia has become the exception.

Egypt's government, by banning the Muslim Brotherhood, has taken the country backward since the military coup that overthrew President Mohamed Morsi last July. The Egyptian process, however, should not be considered merely a return to the pre-2011 *status quo*; rather, developments constitute what could be characterized as an ascending spiral that, while turning back on itself, nevertheless advances.

The generational split within Egypt is evident: social mobilization has given young Egyptians valuable political experience, and this represents a key difference from the three decades of former President Hosni Mubarak's rule. The same could be said of Syria, though the spiral there has been an unremittingly downward one, and any reversal remains blocked, particularly since the failure of the second round of peace negotiations in Geneva.

More generally, lack of pluralism and the inability to share power are holding back the transitions. With the exception of Tunisia, this can be seen to varying degrees in all of the affected countries. In Egypt, both the army – whether under Mubarak or Field Marshal Abdul-Fattah el-Sisi – and the Islamists have demonstrated that they want all power for themselves.

Political pluralism cannot be imposed. Societies must demand it and build the lasting institutions needed to preserve it. This process can take many years, making it crucial not to lose historical perspective. The situation in each country was different when the revolts began. Countries with homogenous societies, such as Tunisia, have suffered only minimal violence, unlike socially heterogenous countries, such as Syria. Nor are there any consolidated regional structures to which the transition countries can adhere; and there are few local models – with the

exception of Turkey, for example – that can be used to help democracy and pluralism take root.

Indeed, the context in which these transitions were set in motion was – and remains –unfavorable compared to those taking place in Europe. Unlike the Arab countries, Eastern Europe and the Balkans benefited from a common starting point and a common path forward: all are part of a continent that has taken historic steps toward integration since World War II. That has given them a common destination as well, both politically (accession to the European Union) and in terms of their security (through NATO).

But the situations in Bosnia and Ukraine are still very fluid. Twenty-five years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and 23 years after the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the post-communist transition is still incomplete.

We cannot expect results in the Middle East in three years that have not been achieved in Europe in a quarter-century. Despite the backsliding in Egypt and the intolerable violence in Syria, the region is evolving at its own pace in a complex, changing, and unstable geopolitical context. A patient strategy and an unwavering dedication to pluralism are fundamental, whether in Kyiv or Cairo.