

Between the „Arab Spring“ and the Thai elections

The months long reporting on the unrest in the Arab world misses one important point; each and every country engulfed by the popular revolt is a republic, while monarchies (situated predominantly on the Arabian Peninsula, GCC) remain largely intact.

Difference between e.g. Libya or Tunisia and Saudi Arabia or U.A.E. is not only geographic – it is fundamental. The first are formal democracies of republican type (traditionally promoting a secular pan-Arabism) and later are real autocracies of hereditary monarchy type (closer to the rightist Islamic than a pan-Arabic ideology).

Since its independence, Tunisia, Libya or Egypt have kept democratic election process and institutional setup of executive, judicial and legislative branch – in formal sense, although in reality they have often been run by the alienated power structures of over-dominant party leader (guardian of revolution, or other sort of ‘father of the nation’). Authoritarian monarchies have been, and still are ruled by a direct royal decree without even formally electable democratic institutions.

Modern political history analyses give us a powerful reminder that the most exposed and most vulnerable states are countries transitioning from a formal to a real democracy.

Despotic absolutistic regimes are fast, brutal and decisive in suppressing popular revolt (some of them even declining over decades to sign the fundamental Charter on HR). After all, the source of their legitimacy is an omnipresent and omnipotent apparatus of coercion (police, royal guard, army), not a democratically contested popular support in the multiparty scenery.

Real democracies with the well-consolidated institutions, civil sector and matured political culture of electorate enjoy larger system legitimacy. They are electable and able to channel any popular grievances into the mainstream political process. Democratic institutions with a large participation base also increase the transparency of particular political decisions, and are capacitated to place necessary constraints on any eventual alienation of executive branch.

Notably, the consolidated **real democracies can translate** mass protests from **a street event into a** democratic, participatory, **institutionalized process** of socio-economic compromise and political reform – for the lasting benefit of all societal segments and acceptable, enduring outcome for the most, if not all, stakeholders.

An authoritarian regime will brutally crack any protest, and deploy army and police without any hesitation, as to preserve the status quo (e.g. Bahrain). Even if the street prevails over the regime’s forces, the event of transformation will be a personal, not a structural change (and often only, when the armed forces decide to tilt their support and back another frontrunner).

For the fragile systems that are transitioning from the formal to real democracies with a developing, but still weak institutions and evolving political culture, the street revolts are posing particularly tedious challenge. They neither can turn the street events into the viable institutional process nor can they brutally suppress the popular revolt.

This neither-nor afloat situation is exactly what we are witnessing in Egypt and Tunisia now.

On the other side, opposing protesters (organized or spontaneous) are inexperienced as well: Freedom is more complex than the Facebook feed-news and Aljazeera may tell. The **essence**

of freedom is larger than a free choice; it is actually **to hold a full responsibility for the choice made**. Taking arms and blocking key city avenues for months is neither an expression of freedom nor of a democratic choice, it is an autarkic anarchy deprived from any responsibility. Making a choice without consequence is anarchy. By the same token, democracy is more than a lame slogan from the social network site, which lately inspires and mobilizes the street protesters; it is not a one-time 'cool' *flashmobs* socializing event. (After all, the FB is just a communication tool, not a replacement for critical independent thinking)

Democracy is a procedure and the content¹; it is a fine-calibrated social contract that ties all horizontal and vertical segments of society. This is a truly comprehensive and sustainable way to conceive the past, presence and future of the nation.

Many protesters sweeping the streets of Arab cities, and cities elsewhere are mixing the two anarchy and freedom. Paradox of end game is indeed a painful lesson: **there is no democracy on expenses of the sovereign integrity of state. Fractured social cohesion does not build up the nation**. Short, overheated spring for many in the Arab world might end up in a cold long winter².

Libya is losing its territorial integrity, Egypt is losing its economic sovereignty, Syria and Yemen, fracturing its cohesion, are each on a dangerous collision course to lose both, and Tunisia is unapt to translate wishes of the street into the badly needed political reform.

One of the most evident side effects of a nation building (especially in early, constituting years of nationhood) are the alienated despots, heading the state. Legacy-after is always mixed, and the public opinion is per definition emotional when reflecting upon. Unselective condemnations are flying and the responsibility shifts to reduce blame on a handful few of individuals. Nevertheless, **a cult of personality appears when the personal charisma meets rings of persistent poltroons** and enduring tacit supporters. Intellectuals and media in the post cult years are playing an indispensable role. Intellectuals and media should perform an **independent still responsible and constructive thinking and acting**. An objective, unbiased valorisation must come from academia, while media has a mandate to enlarge the platform of such debate, at the same time to discharge emotional, irrational element from this discussion. This is the only possible way for the self-realization, for an emancipation of nation. Without such a valorisation (and relief from the national trauma), no society can move forward to find the elementary social cohesion.

Current events in the Arab countries are particularly instructive for the South-East Asia. Nearly all of the SEA countries have moved (in paste decades or years) from the formal to real democracies. For the first time in history, in most of the SEA states the economic growth is higher than the demographic growth. This means that a massive formation of middle class is on its way, in the societies that traditionally were run by (enlightening) elites.

¹ The active and passive voting right (to vote and to be voted) is traditionally portrayed as a grand historical achievement. In this respect, to boycott elections means to refrain from exercising an elementary political right. I often explain to my students that there is a critical difference between staying at home, from an act of going to the pooling stations and crossing/nullifying the whole list. It is of a same end effect, but the message is different: we are absent, disengaged and ignorant vs. we do participate, but we do not agree with the given choice. Thus, democracy offers but also obliges.

² The present borders of Arabic states are the legacy of colonial interference – feature evident in the SEA, Indian sub-continent and other parts of Asia too. The Arab world is still absorbing a shock of loss of its universalistic world. Notably, living in more than one state is a historical novelty for the Arabs, and the intellectual elite of the Arabic world remained divided for decades on the question of which size, ideological and socio-political content as well as the socio-economic role the state should play in the Arab civilization. To make a trouble worse, here are additional two factors that are currently undermining the Arab state. One is a neo-liberal dogma, which generally preaches an end to *étatisme* and a free liberated, borderless corporate world. The second, locally very important, is the so-called revolutionary appeal. The aggressive Wahhabism-powered Al-Qaida, identically like the early Bolsheviks, treats a state as a revolutionary cause, not as a geopolitical and geo-economic reality. Nowadays, fewer and fewer forces are supporting the Arab (republican) state, internally and externally.

Newly arriving, inexperienced middle class is especially sensitive segment of society. The new wave of economic egoism and of nationalism across Asia (often replacing the fading communism or disillusion with overly-consumerist McFB-way of life) puts additional stress (and confusing distortion) on the emerging middle class.

It was not an upper, but a middle class, which brought a worldwide-admired prosperity and stability of Sweden or Denmark. However, it was also a middle class that voted and durably supported Mussolini and Hitler. The middle class is like a dual-use technology, it can be deployed peacefully, but it also might be destructively weaponized, for at home or abroad.

Some SEA countries, like Malaysia and Singapore (following an impressive economic growth and demographic transition), with already well-established middle class are facing other challenge: to institutionalize the paramount figures of their “fathers of the nation”. The post-Bismarck Germany failed to manage it. Provincial, insecure leadership around new Keiser did not know what to do with the strong Germany, and repeatedly contested all structures inside and outside Germany. The post-Tito Yugoslavia ended in the bloody civil wars as the incompetent elites found their legitimacy only in confrontational clerical-nationalism. However, the post-Deng China has managed to institutionalize the paramount figure of a bold and brave reformer.

Looking ahead the Thai parliamentary elections, the main issue should not be a choice between the colour of red and colour of yellow. It is far more important to domesticate premises over which the political debate will be conducted: confrontational or co-operative, affirmative or dismissive, visionary or shortsighted, distortional or focused.

For further sustained economic growth, and overall social coherence each and every of the SEA states needs to further mobilize and empower its middle class (whose passions and affiliations will inevitably challenge established elites domestically and question their policies internationally, in a related search for a new social consensus). Ignoring or hindering the massive arrival of middle class would be a socially costly, politically dangerous and historically irresponsible gambit³.

This necessitates fundamental adjustment in the socio-economic and socio-political program of political parties as well as the skilful enlargement of participatory base, not only in Thailand but elsewhere in SEA too. Emotional charges (including nationalism, irredentism or religious fanaticism), exploitation of residual fears by the populist demagogy would pollute the climate in which the newly arriving middle class is to cultivate its own political culture. Established elites have a new call of responsibility: to accommodate arrivals, set up and capacitate the frame⁴ and finally to determine the direction of conduct.

Therefore, if you ask me what is my political preference for Thailand tomorrow and for the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore or Indonesia the day after tomorrow – I would say that the matured, responsible and broad-participatory political process should win. It should be a resolute vote for a climate which consolidates (rather than tires apart) societal consensus. Killing the political culture and its entire process for an electoral term in office is a too heavy price to pay. Neither political parties nor voters can afford it.

³ Tens of millions of young individuals will be closing their tertiary education all over SEA in the following few years. It is on the established elites to offer to these young, socially mobilized and educated middle class in forming either an opportunity (fair political environment as well as economic and social security) or to hand them over to a hope (often associated with the radicals from left and right). In (a lasting) absence of opportunity, any hope is welcomed.

⁴ There is no single historical example that any state has managed to prevent emerging middle class from socio-political forming. However, there are numerous examples of huge costs paid for the a-historical attitudes in particular societies denying such an entry.

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