

(Global Research, February 9, 2011)



North Africa and the Global Political Awakening, Part 2

Overview

In Part 1 of this series, I analyzed the changing nature of the Arab world, in experiencing an uprising as a result of the 'Global Political Awakening.' Ultimately, I assessed that these could potentially be the birth pangs of a global revolution; however, the situation is more complicated than it appears on the surface.

While the uprisings spreading across the Arab world have surprised many observers, the same could not be said for the American foreign policy and strategic establishment. A popular backlash against American-supported dictatorships and repressive regimes has been anticipated for a number of years, with arch-hawk geopolitical strategist Zbigniew Brzezinski articulating a broad conception of a 'Global Political Awakening' taking place, in which the masses of the world (predominantly the educated, exploited and impoverished youth of the 'Third World') have become acutely aware of their subjugation, inequality, exploitation and oppression. This 'Awakening' is largely driven by the revolution in information, technology and communication, including radio, television, but most especially the Internet and social media. Brzezinski had accurately identified this 'Awakening' as the greatest threat to elite interests regionally, but also internationally, with America sitting on top of the global hierarchy.

This spurred on the development of an American strategy in the Arab world, modeled on similar strategies pursued in recent decades in other parts of the world, in promoting "democratization," by developing close contacts with 'civil society' organizations, opposition leaders, media sources, and student organizations. The aim is not to promote an organic Arab democracy 'of the people, and for the people,' but rather to promote an evolutionary "democratization" in which the old despots of American strategic support are removed in favour of a neoliberal democratic system, in which the outward visible institutions of democracy are present (multi-party elections, private media, parliaments, constitutions, active civil society, etc); yet, the power-holders within that domestic political system remain subservient to U.S. economic and strategic interests,

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continuing to follow the dictates of the IMF and World Bank, supporting America's military hegemony in the region, and "opening up" the Arab economies to be "integrated" into the world economy. Thus, "democratization" becomes an incredibly valuable strategy for maintaining hegemony; a modern re-hash of "Let them eat cake!" Give the people the 'image' of democracy and establish and maintain a co-dependent relationship with the new elite. Thus, democracy for the people becomes an exercise in futility, where people's 'participation' becomes about voting between rival factions of elites, who all ultimately follow the orders of Washington.

This strategy also has its benefit for the maintenance of American power in the region. While dictators have their uses in geopolitical strategy, they can often become too independent of the imperial power and seek to determine the course of their country separate from U.S. interests, and are subsequently much more challenging to remove from power (i.e., Saddam Hussein). With a "democratized" system, changing ruling parties and leaders becomes much easier, by simply calling elections and supporting opposition parties. Bringing down a dictator is always a more precarious situation than "changing the guard" in a liberal democratic system.

However, again, the situation in the Arab world is still more complicated than this brief overview, and American strategic concerns must take other potentialities into consideration. While American strategists were well aware of the growing threat to stability in the region, and the rising discontent among the majority of the population, the strategists tended to identify the aim as "democratization" through evolution, not revolution. In this sense, the uprisings across the Arab world pose a major strategic challenge for America. While ties have been made with civil society and other organizations, they haven't all necessarily had the ability to be firmly entrenched, organized and mobilized. In short, it would appear that America was perhaps unprepared for uprisings to take place this soon. The sheer scale and rapid growth of the protests and uprisings makes the situation all the more complicated, since they are not dealing with one nation alone, but rather an entire region (arguably one of, if not the most strategically important region in the world), and yet they must assess and engage the situation on a country-by-country basis.

One danger arises in a repeat in the Arab world of the trends advanced in Latin America over the past decade: namely, the growth of populist democracy. The protests have brought together a wide array of society – civil society, students, the poor, Islamists, opposition leaders, etc. – and so America, with ties to many of these sectors (overtly and covertly), must now make many choices in regards of who to support.

Another incredibly important factor to take into consideration is military intervention. America has firmly established ties with the militaries in this region, and it appears evident that America

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is influencing military actions in Tunisia. Often, the reflex position of imperial power is to support the military, facilitate a coup, or employ repression. Again, this strategy would be determined on a country-by-country basis. With a popular uprising, military oppression will have the likely effect of exacerbating popular discontent and resistance, so strategic use of military influence is required.

This also leaves us with the potential for the 'Yemen option': war and destabilization. While presenting its own potential for negative repercussions (namely, in instigating a much larger and more radical uprising), engaging in overt or covert warfare, destabilizing countries or regions, is not taboo in American strategic circles. In fact, this is the strategy that has been deployed in Yemen since the emergence of the Southern Movement in 2007, a liberation movement seeking secession from the U.S.-supported dictatorship. Shortly after the emergence of the Southern Movement, al-Qaeda appeared in Yemen, prompting U.S. military intervention. The Yemeni military, armed, trained and funded by the United States, has been using its military might to attempt to crush the Southern Movement as well as a rebel movement in the North.

In short, the 'Arab Awakening' presents possibly the greatest strategic challenge to American hegemony in decades. The likely result will be a congruence of multiple simultaneously employed strategies including: "democratization," oppression, military intervention and destabilization. Again, it could be a mistake to assume one strategy for the whole region, but rather to assess it on a country-by-country basis, based upon continuing developments and progress in the 'Awakening'.

The Council on Foreign Relations Strategy to "Democratize" the Arab World

