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Prospects for Arab politics in 2012

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An Oxford Analytica Prospect

The outcome of the 2011 political upheavals should become clearer in 2012 following elections in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. The Islamist-dominated governments that are set to emerge will take decisions that affect the region's long-term future, overseeing the drafting of new constitutions and tackling the economic and social issues that prompted the uprisings in the first place. However, the unresolved outcomes of two ongoing popular and armed struggles, and the potential for further instability, mean that the initial revolutionary 'contagion' of 2011 has yet to run its course. Conflict is set to continue in Syria and Yemen where popular opposition movements have failed to unseat the incumbent regimes.

What next

Libya's new political landscape will take shape as militias and emerging political factions organise themselves ahead of polls for a constituent assembly. The Muslim Brotherhood will do well in Egypt's parliamentary elections, while Tunisia's Islamist al-Nahda party will face the test of a coalition government. Yemen's president may finally depart, but this will not bring stability. Pressure on the Syrian regime will intensify as the uprising becomes increasingly militarised and the economy weakens. Tensions will rise in the Gulf as new evidence emerges of Iranian efforts to develop nuclear weapons. Iraq is unlikely to become an Iranian proxy after the US withdrawal, but political dysfunction will undermine effective government.

Analysis

As the country where the uprisings began, Tunisia's political progress will set a benchmark for the region.

Al-Nahda, admired by voters for its long struggle against the regime of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, promotes moderation and inclusion, and is likely to take a pragmatic approach to government, particularly considering the country's strong secular tradition. The party does not have a majority and will face tough negotiations that could test its unity with secular liberal and socialist parties over policy priorities and the constitution. It was elected as part of a Constituent Assembly, which will appoint an interim president and cabinet, and produce a new constitution, leading to full parliamentary and presidential elections at the end of 2012 (see TUNISIA: Elections boost regional democracy - October 25, 2011).



Protesters chant slogans against the government and military rulers at Tahrir Square after Friday prayers in Cairo. (REUTERS/Mohamed Abd El Ghany)

Strategic summary

- Islamist parties will seek to govern in partnership, but will find it difficult to build coalitions with the secular centre and left.
- Saudi Arabia will remain insulated from political upheaval, but instability in neighbouring Yemen and Iran's nuclear programme will be major concerns.
- The Arab League may expel Syria and there will be calls for Turkey to set up secure areas close to the Syrian border.

Tunisia's most urgent need is for a solution to the structural economic difficulties that have been exacerbated by the Arab uprisings and the financial turmoil in Europe. Al-Nahda and its rivals will want to increase their share of the vote in elections that follow constitutional reform. However, the government will face high expectations from an electorate that expects a more equitable future.

The realities of government will test the popularity of Islamist groups, particularly among their fundamentalist adherents

Yet Tunisia faces the lowest hurdles to a successful post-revolutionary transition. Elsewhere in the region, the barriers to stable government and sound economic management are higher.

Libyan state-building

The Transitional National Council (TNC) will face challenges exerting its authority as the urgent task of reconstruction begins.

Well-armed militias from Misrata and the Jebel Nafusa region believe that they should be rewarded for their part in the struggle. Yet political leaders in Tripoli want to re-assert the capital's traditional influence, as will some of the major tribes. Islamists, who opposed the regime of former leader Muammar al-Qadhafi for many years and form the backbone of many of the militias, will have a major influence in the new political landscape, but are unlikely to adopt anti-Western or anti-business stances (see LIBYA: Islamists will play pragmatic role in power - November 4, 2011).

Meanwhile, the TNC faces the challenge of building a wide consensus to persuade the militias to merge into a new national army or disarm. Any new regime is likely to face demands for rapid improvement in living standards and a greater share of the national oil wealth. On the positive side, Libya should benefit from rising oil and gas revenues as installations are repaired. (see LIBYA: Transition offers business risks and rewards - October 19, 2011).

Egyptian transition

Egypt will not have a new parliament until February 2012, even though the prolonged election process starts on November 28. That parliament is charged with appointing a committee to draw up a new constitution, leading to presidential elections and a return to civilian rule in 2013.

The Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) is committed to stepping back from government, but it is also intent on retaining the military's independence from civilian oversight. Its attempt to impose conditions on the Constitutional Committee angered all political parties, forcing it to retreat for the moment (see EGYPT: Military interests shape transition outlook - November 1, 2011).

Meanwhile, rising criminality is worrying the Egyptian public amid the SCAF's failure to re-organise and return the police to the streets. There is a sense of drift, and the economy is shrinking despite some recent signs of a recovery. This will affect the election campaign, which should see significant wins by the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Freedom and Justice Party, and other Islamist parties.

A lengthy electoral timetable combined with a series of missteps by the interim rulers is paving the way for a tense political transition. While the SCAF remains broadly popular, its support is ebbing away due to:

- its arrest of several iconic figures who inspired the revolution;
- procedural delays in the trial of former President Hosni Mubarak; and
- failure to accept that soldiers opened fire on Coptic demonstrators in October.

SCAF's handling of these issues has highlighted its lack of political communication skills and its refusal to cede decision-making powers to the cabinet that it appointed.

Syrian instability

The Syrian uprising is likely to intensify and spread, adopting a more sectarian character -- and could become more violent as defecting soldiers organise. The external opposition has formed a more united front, but has not yet become a potential alternative to the regime.

The regime, built around the family of President Bashar al-Assad and allied Allawi clans, retains formidable repressive power. It has lost the backing of some important Sunni business interests, but can still prevent serious disturbances in the major cities of Damascus and Aleppo (see SYRIA: Conflict stalemate leads to civil war - October 18, 2011).

Damascus remains defiant in the face of UN resolutions and the West's calls for Assad to go. However, it faces increasing pressure from the Arab League and Turkey, which are calling for an end to repression and major political reforms. Syria will be worried by signs of a more strident stance from Ankara, which might establish havens for Syrian opposition groups close to the border.

The regime's weak point is the economy, which is shrinking due to sanctions and ongoing instability. Oil exports are falling as the regime fails to find alternative markets. Economic decline will eventually undermine the regime. It will not fall soon, as there are no signs of any major fractures within the armed forces. However, its collapse could be bloody.

Yemen's slow-motion collapse

President Ali Abdallah Saleh and his family, who control the key elements in the security forces, face a stark choice. They must either accept or reject a deal -- backed by the UN Security Council and Washington -- under which Saleh hands over executive power to his vice-president and leaves office after presidential elections in early 2012.

Although Saleh seems ready to sign, he has evaded previous deals and is under pressure from his family to stay. The two most likely scenarios are:

Egypt's political tensions are
set to rise

The Syrian regime will survive
for now, but economic
pressure will ultimately
undermine it

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- Saleh fails to go, sparking a prolonged civil conflict with the forces of his former ally General Ali Mohsen and tribal militias.
- Saleh steps down and is replaced by a regime that is weak and divided.

Yemen's future looks bleak. US drone strikes have had some success in degrading Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), but the core leadership remains intact. A key security threat is the emergence in the south of 'Ansar al-Sharia', an insurgent group allied to AQAP. The security forces put aside their confrontation to push out the insurgents, but the group will return as the regime weakens.

Al-Qaida militants will regroup in southern Yemen as the situation deteriorates

Bahrain sectarian troubles

There will be continuing low-level violence in Shia villages and occasional larger protests in Manama. Following the boycott of parliamentary by-elections by the leading Shia party there is no credible Shia representation in parliament, which, like the regime, is dominated by the minority Sunni community.

The situation will not change soon, as reformist tendencies within the ruling Al Khalifa family are checked by hard-liners -- with the strong backing of Saudi Arabia.

Saudi stability

Saudi Arabia has bought time through its heavy spending on job creation, housing and salary increases, but is unlikely to use it for political reform, partly because there is not much demand.

The exception is the Shia minority in the Eastern Province. The area has witnessed minor disturbances inspired by events in Bahrain. However, Shia leaders believe they have more to gain by co-operating with the regime than opposing it.

The ruling family managed the succession smoothly after the death of Crown Prince Sultan, via the Allegiance Council set up five years ago by King Abdallah. The conservative Prince Nayef, who remains the interior minister, took his place. However, the family operates through consensus and Nayef's new status is unlikely to cause substantial policy changes. Serious regional challenges in Iran, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria will provide added incentive for the regime to remain united.

Iranian stand-off

Riyadh will seek to weaken Iran by exploiting the escalation in international pressure on Tehran surrounding the alleged attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador in Washington and the International Atomic Energy Agency's assessment that Tehran may be secretly developing nuclear weapons.

Sectarian and political fissures in the region will be exacerbated, and Saudi-Iranian rivalry will make it harder for OPEC to influence oil prices. Saudi Arabia will endeavour to bolster its security partnership with the United States in the Gulf as international talks on Iran's own nuclear programme stall (see GULF STATES: Expanded US role will bolster defences - November 8, 2011)

Reforming monarchies

Morocco and Oman have avoided serious domestic opposition through wage and subsidy increases and mild political reform, but will need to do more soon. Upcoming parliamentary elections in Morocco should test the king's reform pledges. A possible strong showing by the main Islamist opposition party could challenge the monarchy's longstanding political hegemony.

Jordan's political elite wants more power from the king, but does not want to share this with the people. Jordan accepted the offer of Gulf Cooperation Council membership and is negotiating terms and has received a substantial contribution to its budget deficit from Saudi Arabia. More is likely to follow as the Saudis seek to bolster friendly regimes in the region (see MIDDLE EAST: Jordan to benefit most from GCC ties - August 8, 2011).

Popular pressure will increase
on non-oil exporting
monarchies

Political stalemates

US aid to Iraq will continue on a large scale after the withdrawal of its forces. The stalemate that has persisted among the country's politicians since the 2010 elections will continue, and Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki should find ways of circumventing parliament to push through reforms. However, there will be no agreement on major outstanding issues, including over the future of Kirkuk, relations between central government and the regions (notably Kurdistan), and a new oil law.

The Palestinian application for full statehood status at the UN will fail to kick-start meaningful negotiations with Israel. Popular Palestinian frustration will increase. Egypt and Jordan will stick with their peace treaties with Israel -- though Cairo will have to give greater weight to public opinion, which remains hostile to Israel.

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