

COMMENTARY

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From Arab Spring to Presidential Spring

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Three years ago, popular uprisings overthrew four Arab presidents-for-life, revealing the degree to which the nepotistic political systems they had constructed to maintain their rule had atrophied and lost their resilience. No longer able to adapt and absorb the strains and challenges generated by social and economic change, they had become brittle and vulnerable, and lost control in what has been labelled the “Arab Spring.”

A very different kind of “Spring” is now underway, as four Arab countries approach presidential elections in the coming few months. Only one of them – Egypt – actually had its Spring, whereas Syria is mired in a brutal civil war and the Algerian regime managed to fragment and defuse any popular opposition before it could mount or unite. Lebanon’s political pluralism makes it very different, but stubborn refusal to change the confessional system is eroding the constitutional pillars of its democracy and threatens the cohesion of the state itself.

That these four countries are approaching presidential elections at the same time is pure coincidence. But they all reveal the enduring power of entrenched elite players and institutional actors and their ability to perpetuate self-serving – and mostly authoritarian – politics. The “Presidential Spring” does not signal the start of another long period of stable, if mediocre, autocratic rule, comparable to 1970-2010. But it reflects a potent mix – that varies widely from country to country – of factional politics within ruling elites and power structures, weak legislatures and impotent ministerial councils, politicized militaries, and growing external influence that threaten to reproduce authoritarian tendencies or generate new ones.

This is already evident in the manipulation of laws and timetables governing the presidential elections, in ways that potentially serve incumbents or other powerful players. A decree issued

by Egyptian interim president Adly Mansour on March 8, for example, disallowed appeals against results, arguably contravening Article 97 of the newly revised constitution. And with only weeks to go, the election date has still not been set, making it difficult for anyone but the de facto incumbent ruler of Egypt, former defence minister Field Marshall Abdul-Fattah Sisi, to campaign effectively.

Much the same is true of Syria, where on March 14 the parliament revised the electoral law so as to allow multi-candidacies, while imposing a residence requirement that effectively excluded opposition figures from running. Here, too, a date has not been set for the election, and the ongoing civil war makes a credible election completely impossible, but it serves President Bashar al-Assad to perform the ritual so as to claim renewed legitimacy. After all, the referendum that returned him to office in 2007 with an alleged “yes” vote of 97.62 percent in a reported turnout of 96 percent, was described by the interior minister at that time as proof of “the political maturity of Syria and the brilliance of our democracy.”

In Algeria the electoral law was not changed, but before deciding to seek a fourth term, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika considered amending the constitution to extend his current term in office from five to seven years. Here, too, the lack of clarity until a few weeks ago about whether or not Bouteflika would actually run, despite his serious illness, has discouraged other candidacies and emptied the field.

These examples underline the survival of a key feature of the regimes of Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, Tunisia’s Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, and Yemen’s Ali Abdullah Saleh: even where there has been a formal move from selecting presidents by referendum to elections and from a single “yes/no” choice to multi-candidacies, the lack of certainty over electoral procedures is being used to ensure reasonable certainty over the electoral outcome.

Egypt offers an especially telling example of how autocratic rulers continue to treat legal and constitutional frameworks as infinitely malleable. The presidential election will take place well before parliamentary elections, reversing the “roadmap” published by the same ruling authorities after they overthrew President Mohammad Morsi on July 3, 2013. Furthermore, the new electoral law was issued less than two months after the ratification of a new constitution in January, which could just as easily have set clear and binding rules for presidential elections. The fact that this was Egypt’s third constitution in three years – besides several constitutional declarations – and that the authorities claimed it had been endorsed by 98.1 percent of voters who turned out, reinforces the conclusion that procedures and mechanisms continue to be manipulated so as to guarantee specific outcomes.

Democracy offers the opposite: certainty over procedures, and uncertainty over the outcome. This is why Lebanon’s slide is worrying. The constitution, which prevents the president from running for two consecutive terms, has not been challenged directly. But the incumbent’s term

has been extended twice since President Elias Hrawi introduced a constitutional amendment allowing this in 1995. This legal device was later used by his successor President Emile Lahoud in 2004, and may be brought into play again when President Michel Sleiman's term ends in May 2014. The parliament that must approve this extended its own mandate on dubious legal grounds last year, undermining the moral authority of the Constitutional Council, Lebanon's only other remaining source of legitimacy.

The machinations of presidential elections do not herald a simple return to authoritarianism in Lebanon - Suleiman is certainly not an autocrat – nor in the other three Arab countries. Despite his autocratic methods of political control, Algeria's Bouteflika has forced the military into a partial retreat from power. As importantly, he must deal with a more diverse socio-political arena than his predecessors ever did, limiting his choices and constraining his behaviour.

The same is true in Egypt, where strongman Sisi and the alignment supporting him – the military, security, and judiciary and various old regime elements and business figures – are already struggling to contain a deepening socio-economic crisis and can no longer prevent societal challenges – from industrial and public sector workers, revolutionary youth and football fans, and even rank-and-file policemen. And in Syria, even if the Assad regime survives the ongoing civil war, it will face unprecedented demands from the social constituencies that fought for it, and at the same time be forced into new compromises with other sectors in order to attract capital and investment for economic reconstruction.

The new, not-so-new, and life-long presidents who will take office in the coming few months have few policy options and fewer resources to resolve the challenges they face. Domestic and external alliances cannot deflect mounting socio-economic problems, nor compensate for the steadily declining legitimacy and cohesion of political systems and of the constitutional frameworks that underpin them. In this sense, the Presidential Spring is very much an integral part of the continuing processes of change and contestation set in motion by the “original” Arab Spring of 2011.

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