

Military power blooms again in this troubled Arab spring

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What lessons you draw from the political unrest we are observing in the Arab world depends to a large degree on where you stand.

In the West, the focus has been on the dissatisfaction of the Arab youth bulge, the power of social media to rally activists, the demands for personal and political freedom and the attraction of democratic choice. In essence, the events have strengthened the West's belief that individual political and social freedom and the free market have universal application.

Among the region's rulers however, different lessons are being taken away from these events.

The first is that economic dissatisfaction has played a part in at least some of the protests, so dissent can be headed off by the age-old tradition of buying off the population in return for political quiescence. Saudi Arabia did this by allocating \$35 billion to the unemployed and first home buyers in February, and another \$96 billion in March. The UAE gave the poorer northern Emirates \$1.6 billion for infrastructure improvements in March.

Of course, when you are rich oil-exporting Gulf states, such measures are open to you. Syria increased pension payments, but the additional \$10 billion cost illustrated Syria's straitened financial situation and failed to satisfy the protesters.

The most important lesson being learnt by some rulers though is the continued utility of force, or at least retaining the ability to use it. That means the key to remaining in power is not political reform, but maintaining the loyalty of the military.

The reaction of the military (as opposed to the non-military security forces) to popular uprisings, and the impact on the ruling regime, has fallen into three broad categories.

The first has been where the military either withdrew its support (in the case of Tunisia) or remained neutral (in the case of Egypt — although there are some who question the degree of the Egyptian military's neutrality). In both instances the ruler fell. In neither case did the ruler's family play a major role in the military command structure.

The second category is where the military split, but the ruler has been able to rely on the loyalty of at least part of the military (normally the most capable elements controlled by family members) as well as other party loyalists and tribal allies. Libya and Yemen provide the best examples — although weakened and unable to exercise control over the country, the ruler and his military have been able to create a stalemate.

Ultimately, Gaddafi and Saleh are unlikely to survive but they fight on in the belief that they may outlast the opposition, or at worst be able to negotiate a better personal outcome than if they had fallen early in the piece.

The final category, and perhaps most instructive for other autocrats, has been where the military has remained loyal to the regime. This was the case in Bahrain (where sectarian considerations played a role in the military's attitude towards the protesters) and is on display in the face of a much more serious threat to regime survival in Syria.

If a country suffering deep economic problems and ruled in the same authoritarian manner by the same family for over forty years can survive where others fell, largely because the military stayed loyal, other Arab regimes are likely to pay more attention to strengthening their military forces than they are to political reforms.

While many in the West like to point to the emergence of people power as the determinant of political rule in the Arab world, many Arab rulers are looking instead at the continued utility of military power as the foundation of political rule.

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