

Game Over: revolution's tipping point

The tipping point for successful revolution occurs when the army disobeys the dictator

Chibli Mallat, Saturday 6 Aug 2011

The people of Egypt have identified in their revolution a condition sine qua non for the fall of the regime: the forced removal of its head. They were absolutely correct. 'The people want the fall of the regime' has for a necessary correlate that 'the people want the fall of the president'. This surely is not the last phase of a revolution, but it is the necessary first one. As the tide continues to ensure that the revolution is not limited to the fall of the dictator, other elements become important, such as recovered freedom of speech, the end of police and military repression, proper representation in government, and the dismissal of regime leaders and assassins at lower levels and their subsequent trials. That second phase is with us in Egypt, Tunisia, and to the extent that the fallen dictator is not allowed back, in Yemen.

The dictator resigning or fleeing is therefore a momentous pinnacle in the revolutionary first phase. But can we do better in appreciating when the game is up? Is there a tipping point signaling that the first necessary objective has become irreversible?

This question is now raised in the three other countries where massive protests have taken place and have endured: Bahrain, Syria and Libya.

In monarchies like Bahrain, the revolutionary tide never reached a clear point where the protests openly requested 'the change of regime'. When the movement developed in this direction on March 13 in Bahrain, the King called in Saudi forces to bolster his decision to repress the demonstrations, and succeeded in stopping the revolution by sheer force. In Libya and Syria, however, the demand for the fall of the regime came to the fore very quickly after the first demonstrations in mid-January and mid-March respectively.

Both Egypt and Tunisia give us hints on the tipping point, as do other people revolutions in history: once the demand for the fall of the regime is at the center of the demonstrators' requests, the question shifts to the last standing bulwark which the dictator relies on for his survival. That ultimate wall is the army, as the last rung in the multi-level apparatus of repression that ensures that the orders of the dictator are followed. Once the dictator's orders are disobeyed by the army, his diktat erected as system collapses.

The storming of the Bastille on 14th July 1789 would have been insignificant if Louis xvi had succeeded in ordering his troops to retake it. That night, because the mobilisation of the people of Paris had been so significant, along with a political standoff by the representatives of the Third Estate's open meeting in the Jeu de Paume a few weeks earlier, the troops stopped acting on the King's central order needed for his survival: to take back the infamous prison as the symbol of the absolute monarchy's rule. In Iran since 1979, the night of the 10th to 11th January is correctly celebrated as 'revolutionary day'. This is the night when the army stopped repressing demonstrators to defend what was left of the Shah's authority. In Tunisia, Ben Ali fled when the head of the army told him on 14 January that he would not take his orders to kill people in the street. And in Egypt, when the army leaders publically stated their decision not to shoot at the demonstrators on 31 January, the regime was over. It was a matter of days before Mubarak was forced out.

The tipping point is therefore easily recognised. Naturally, it is not what the army as the ultimate apparatus of repression says, but what it effectively does, that matters. In Libya and in Syria, and eventually in Bahrain if the revolutionary tide starts anew, one must watch for that tipping point. In Libya, the logic of armed insurrection is different, but the tipping point remains the same: when what is left of Qaddafi's army decides it will no longer fight for him, the game will be up. In Syria, news from Deraa on 15 July that the army is standing between the security services and the people is the most worrying information for the Asad regime since the start of the demonstrations in March. A similar massive defection occurred in Deir az-Zor. The army's military move in Hama and Homs on the eve of Ramadan and the massacre that ensued is now key. On its success or failure to subdue the demonstrations hinges the tipping point in Syria.

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