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The Arab world in turmoil: Nasser's legacy reprise

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Synopsis

A wave of anti-government protests in the Middle East and North Africa that is rewriting the region's political map is sparking a reinterpretation of recent Arab history that could shape political attitudes of future generations.

Commentary

The rise of Islamist forces in Egypt and other nations in which popular uprisings have toppled autocratic leaders over the past 18 months constitutes the Middle East and North Africa's latest attempt to take control of its own history. Islamist forces feed on their history of opposition to autocratic rule and a perception that nationalist, socialist and neo-liberal attempts at addressing the region's national, social and economic issues failed. Newly independent Arab states were ruled either by men who had overthrown leaders who were leftovers of colonialism or claimed hereditary monarchical rights.

Destroying carefully constructed myths

The popular revolts, in contrast to past changes of leadership brought about by military or palace coups or hereditary succession, have created unprecedented space for free and public debate that is questioning if not demolishing carefully constructed myths, particularly those surrounding Arab nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. A colonel in the Egyptian army, Nasser's toppling of the pro-British monarchy in 1952 in the Arab world's most populous nation, positioned Egypt at the forefront of the struggle against Israel and post-colonial economic and social structures and for Arab independence.

Nasser embodied Arab nationalism, the quest for an independent and strong Arab world and the defence of the rights of the poor, despite being also the father of the repressive security state. He fortified his position with the 1956 nationalization of the Suez Canal, his leadership of the Non-Aligned movement, while playing off the United States against the Soviet Union, and his opposition to feudal monarchs in the Gulf, foremost among whom was the Al-Saud in Saudi Arabia. In doing so, he changed the region's political map and influenced the Arab world's first post-colonial generation. With Israel the lightning rod of the new generation of Arab leaders, anti-Israeli policies gave them political legitimacy, feeding on deep-rooted pro-Palestinian sentiment.

Nasser still embodies Arab nationalism for many who now voice criticism of his 16 years of autocratic rule and record of failed disastrous foreign, economic and social policies. In fact Nasser's influence, considerably

diminished by the disastrous six-day war of 1967 in which Arab militaries, including that of Egypt, were destroyed by Israel in a matter of days, is still evident 42 years after his death in 1970. In this year's first democratic presidential elections a Nasserite candidate garnered a fifth of the vote. Nonetheless, Nasser's legacy and that of autocrats who cloaked themselves in nationalism, is for the first time being openly debated in the media and political discourse. Fuelling the debate is criticism of 60 years of military rule in Egypt that started with the coup in which Nasser played a key role.

The debate is sharpened by the loss of appeal of Nasser's pan-Arab philosophy in favour of an Arab world that increasingly perceives itself as a collection of individual states each with their own interests rather than a region in which common politics, culture and religion constitute the overriding unifier. In many ways it is the latest phase of efforts by Arabs to become actors in their own right after having failed to achieve their aspirations through various imported ideologies.

The future of Nasserism

The late Egyptian intellectual Mohamed Sid Ahmed, wrote 12 years ago: "The Nasserism of the future...will not entail the resurgence of a specific ideological platform, policies or a mode of rule. Rather, it will emerge as a refusal to bend to decisions dictated from abroad by agents inimical to Egypt's independence."

Those words were never truer than today in both post-revolt Arab nations as well as those that have yet to experience political change but can no longer ignore public opinion. They put the onus on a crop of new primarily Islamist leaders that are emerging from the upheavals sweeping the Middle East and North Africa. Foremost among them is Mohammed Morsi, a leader of Nasser's nemesis, the Muslim Brotherhood, elected president of Egypt in June just weeks before the 60th anniversary of Nasser's coup.

Morsi's challenge in a nation in which the military's place as a modernizing force dates back to the 19th century, is complicated by the controversy over the role of the military in contemporary Egyptian politics. The Egyptian military, which last year toppled president Hosni Mubarak with a mandate to guide the country towards free and fair elections, effectively pre-empted the Brotherhood's electoral victory by giving itself broad legislative and executive authority on the eve of Morsi's election.

At stake in the ensuing convoluted tug of war between Morsi and the military is the quest for greater freedom and dignity that demands a change in the relationship between the state and the military, and which was the core driver of the popular revolts that have swept the Middle East and North Africa. Nasser embodied both sides of that divide.

Morsi is a representative of a group that despite operating underground for much of its 84-year old history, is marked by a quest for accommodation rather than confrontation. How he manages that divide will determine not only the ultimate success of the popular revolt that brought him to power but also perceptions of Nasser's legacy and future interpretations of contemporary Arab history.

For its part the military appears bent on retaining that part of Nasser's legacy that ascribes legitimacy to its role as protector of the Egyptian nation and enforcer of the security state, while allowing the Islamist parties to compete with the secular groups such as the Nasserites, for control of the civil administration. In reality the new dispensation in Egypt will be a hybrid militarist-Islamist-secularist reprise of Nasser's legacy, while the turmoil continues in the Arab world.

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