

America's Hidden Agenda in the Middle East?

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Popular revolts across the Middle East continue to be a source of hope and inspiration. But there is cause for concern. Imperialism is maneuvering to subvert the will for change. While the situation is still in flux, it looks increasingly likely that the maneuvers will succeed.

When the unemployed Tunisian university graduate Muhammed Bouazizi self-immolated to protest the confiscation of the fruit stall that was his sole means of subsistence, he could not have imagined his final act of desperation would trigger an upswelling of region-wide riots.

But the spark that was lit in Tunisia fired up the peoples of the Middle East. Bin Ali was forced to flee his country in disgrace, Hosni Mubarak was toppled and sent into involuntary retirement. A whole series of countries including Yemen, Jordan, Libya, Bahrain, Iran, even Saudi Arabia, and more, are currently resonating with persistent protests.

In Tunisia and Egypt, the two countries so far where the revolts scored a tangible gain by bringing down the heads of state, broad masses of public led a protracted struggle. Even if no organization or political movement stood out, the masses were far from disorganized. In both countries, the working class played a major part in carrying the revolts to eventual success.

Moreover, both countries had pro-Western governments in power. Comfortable with the status quo, at first the US and its allies as well as the Western media reacted to the revolts with apprehension. Secularism would dissolve and Tunisia would be lost to Islamists if Bin Ali fell, claimed the media organs of the West; similarly, headlines raised the outcry that Egyptian rioters were looting the National Museum in glaring contradiction of eyewitness accounts.

Washington: Observing From a Distance

While Western media took its time noticing and characterizing the revolts, the US appeared to be 'observing from a distance' and avoided taking a clear stand.

In Tunisia, the ouster of Bin Ali was managed under the control of the army in collaboration with the West, facilitated by last minute tutelage from Western European countries including the country's former colonizer France, eliminating 'unwanted' consequences. Once the new government was settled in, the army withdrew its protection over the steadfast activists in the capital city allowing them to be violently removed from Kasbah Square.

Egypt was larger and more complicated than Tunisia, compelling Washington to act with greater wariness. On October 28 Hillary Clinton suggested that Mubarak should “listen to his people”, giving the first hint of a possible shift in the US position.

Subsequent statements from the US side offer a clear picture of how Washington strived to stay on top of the developments.

Obama (February 1): (to Mubarak) Do not run again.

Special envoy Frank Wisner (February 2): (Private meeting with Mubarak) Your presidency is at an end. You should prepare for an orderly transition.

Obama (February 2): (phone call with Mubarak) An orderly transition must be meaningful, it must be peaceful, and it must begin now. Praises to Egypt’s military for showing restraint.

White House spokesman Robert Gibbs (February 2): Time for transition in Egypt is now.

Obama (February 3): Egypt should have a system of government that will meet the aspirations of its people.

US officials (February 4): Mubarak must transfer power to a transitional government run by the VP Omar Suleiman and supported by the military.

First US tweet in Arabic (February 9): President Obama is committed to the view that Egyptians are the ones who need to decide their own fate.

Having spent the early weeks frantically lobbying world governments on Mubarak’s behalf, the government of Israel would also get in stride with Washington’s changed position after a while and proclaim its support for a smooth transition in Egypt.

US pressing for the same script in other countries

The extent of change achieved so far by the popular revolts in Egypt and Tunisia seems to have assuaged imperialistic qualms. In both countries, the will for revolution was evident from the start. But the mass movements lacked focus as well as a commonly shared vision that went beyond the toppling of the individual dictators, and this critical failing has prevented the formulation of a strategy that could pursue qualitative transformation. Pent-up frustration was released at little or no cost to global interests, and power was transferred to figures who enjoy wholehearted imperialist approval.

The vague promise of ‘orderly transition’ won the day, whetting US appetite for more change. On February 12, Obama declared Mubarak’s ouster in Egypt “was only the beginning.”

February 14 saw the US proclaim open support to regime opponents in Iran. Two days later Obama stated his hope that “the people of Iran have the courage to be able to express their yearning for greater freedoms and a more representative government.”

Considering the reticence displayed a year ago when Washington was careful to assume a 'neutral stance' during weeks of protests in post-election Iran, one can observe that the US feels emboldened by recent developments in the Middle East and is more prepared to take decisive steps.

What role for Turkey in the scenario?

In his visit to Iran last week, addressing the host country on a live TV broadcast, Turkish president Abdullah Gül drew attention to ongoing popular revolts in the region and asserted that peoples' demands had to be recognized. Radical reforms might be called for, he said.

When the always calculating Gül voices a pro-reform message in a country on edge where members of parliament are demanding the execution of opposition leaders, one has to wonder if the Justice and Democracy Party is auditioning for a part in Washington's game. Likewise, after avoiding any mention of events in Tunisia at a time when a series of localized protest rallies in Turkey were being crushed by customary police violence, Erdoğan would quickly jump on the bandwagon once Obama's position became evident and make several well publicized statements endorsing the protestors in Egypt.

Touting the 'Turkish model'

In Tunisia and Egypt the revolts appear successfully contained for the time being, with power entrusted to transitional governments loyal to the West. The regimes have gained time to put together a 'democratic' façade behind which exploitation can be further modernized and hated market reforms can pick up speed.

Rampant privatizations, ruthless erosion of social security, disregard of labor laws, youth unemployment at rates to rival anywhere on the globe...

A posture of defiance, and a pandemonium of 'change' that somehow only serves to consolidate allegiance to international dictates... That is the kind of free market democracy that imperialism would like to prescribe to the rebellious Middle East, and it has a tried and tested model at hand.

"Take your cues from the Justice and Democracy Party of Turkey," is the call raised from capital cities of the West. Hence, the renewed interest in Turkey in these past few weeks as a 'democratic moderate Islamic country', and accolades for the JDP that were rehashed most recently by David Lidington, UK's Minister of State for Europe and NATO, when he asserted that he would "far rather the Islamic world, and particularly the young people of the Arab and the wider Muslim world, looked to Prime Minister Erdogan as their model political leader rather than to a Mr. Ahmadinejad."

Not content with merely promoting the JDP as a model, opinion makers have lately taken to suggesting that the party could help negotiate with Egypt's Moslem Brothers. Reliably pro-Western, market friendly Islamists appear to be a winning formula as far as imperialism is concerned.

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