

Good governance after the Arab Spring

Although there is little consensus on the origins and desirability of the protests in the Arab world, the G8 and G20 leaders can take concrete steps towards stability in the region by helping to equip the rising generation of leaders to govern

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As the G8 leaders prepare to meet in Deauville, recent events in the Arab world will continue to command attention. The democratic protests that began in Tunisia and led to the exile of Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali inspired imitators across the region. In Egypt, the protesters at Tahrir Square forced the resignation of Hosni Mubarak. Demonstrations in Bahrain, Jordan, Syria and Yemen prompted governments

to promise reforms, but popular demands for political reform continue to raise questions about the future of governments and leaders in these countries, the ongoing economic costs of political instability and the future of democracy in the Arab world.

Part of this wave of popular protest, but also apart from it, was the uprising in Libya against Muammar Gaddafi. His security forces reacted with violence, and the protesters took up arms. Violence escalated, prompting G8



Anti-government protesters in Bahrain. The unrest that started in Tunisia spread to several other countries in the Middle East and North Africa



members Britain, France, Canada and the United States to engage the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in military action to back the rebels. Italy lent its airbases to NATO allies and participated in the enforcement of the no-fly zone over its former colonial possession. G20 member Turkey joined in policing the arms embargo imposed against Libya in an attempt to limit the escalation of fighting. Britain's David Cameron, France's Nicolas Sarkozy and the US's Barack Obama called for Gaddafi to relinquish power and let the rebels form a new government.

Not all the G8 and G20 countries look favourably on these protests, however. G20 member Saudi Arabia – thus far spared the massive street protests seen in other Arab countries – has nonetheless been affected by instability in Bahrain and Yemen, and by changes in longtime allies such as Egypt. Much of Turkey, with its Sunni Muslim majority population and close historic ties to the Arab world, was once governed by the Ottoman Empire, and cannot be sanguine about the uncertainty facing the region.

In China, the state media noted the protests at Tahrir Square critically, avoiding the inevitable comparisons with the protests at Tiananmen Square. The decision of Western countries to intervene on the side of the protesters in Libya sets a disturbing precedent for Beijing, even after United Nations support was secured to legitimate the intervention. However, perhaps the most difficult issue for China is the question of democracy in formerly authoritarian countries across the Arab world.

The extent to which countries in the Arab world adopt democratic values will certainly vary. It must be the choice of the local population in order to be legitimate. Absent a broader consensus, G8 and G20 leaders should agree to support the governments that emerge in ways that promote stability, respect for basic rights and a return to economic health. Several concrete steps would contribute to these goals as the Arab spring moves into midsummer.

- Establish personal contacts with new leaders. Most of the countries where protesters may form governments have blocked western democracy assistance, or severely restricted it. Non-governmental trainers from the US, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, the Netherlands and other countries have helped to forge close personal ties among democracy activists around the world that have created trust and conveyed skills to prepare them for elections and governing. This preparation is absent in Egypt and Libya. A remedial effort will be necessary to establish contact and trust with new leaders.
- Emphasise governing skills and capacity building. In Central and Eastern Europe, pro-democracy activists were swept into office by voters, only to be voted out at the first opportunity when they failed to deliver a better life for citizens. One reason was inexperience: those allied with the former authoritarian regime were more competent at running a government, a challenge that is more complex than organising a protest campaign. New leaders will need to master fiscal and monetary policy, promote stability and economic growth, and foster the development of a civil society. Drafting a constitution, developing a national budget, organising a legislature, forming a cabinet, providing civilian oversight to the military and security forces in a post-conflict environment are all tasks that can be performed more capably with the benefit of the experience of foreign peers. Exchanges and peer-to-peer mentoring can help new leaders appreciably, and G8 governments have much to share. G20 governments formed after sudden, democratic openings such as Indonesia and South Africa have a generation of leaders who negotiated this difficult transition and might be deployed to help. Other G20 countries with relatively gradual, peaceful transitions to democracy, such as Brazil, Argentina and Mexico, have valuable experiences to share as well.

- Be attentive to the opposition. The leaders who emerge from these societies include those who form new governments as well as the responsible opposition. Authoritarian regimes foster an expectation of “winners take all”, with the result that those who lose elections are tempted to take up arms, or to otherwise destabilise and delegitimise the new government. Responsible opposition leaders and parties are committed to competing for power according to the rule of law and demonstrate that commitment by eschewing violence. The international community, by reaching out to opposition leaders and parties, can avoid taking sides in the nascent democratic politics and also ensure that future alternation in power among new leaders occurs without a crisis.
- Set parameters for political change by engagement and insistence on the rule of law. The G8 and G20 have tremendous influence by virtue of being leaders in the global economy. This influence should be exerted on the side of adherence to human rights norms, democratic best practices for free and fair elections and transparency, and a non-violent contestation for power.

Firm stance

Parties that serve as fronts for militia groups must be excluded from international support unless they give up their arms. New governments that deploy the power of the state against the opposition or segments of the population must similarly immediately lose foreign support, including democracy assistance and development aid. Parties and individuals who seek to restore authoritarianism in one form or another must be treated as antidemocratic and denied international support as well. The firm stance of the G8 and G20 against violence as a means to achieve political ends will set the bounds of political contestation for power in countries where historical experience and tradition have not established such parameters, and will be necessary until democratic norms have taken root.

There is no consensus among either the G8 or the G20 members on the origins and the desirability of the protests in the Arab world. They are clearly divided on the appropriateness of intervention in Libya in particular. Going forward, however, they should seek a unified position on concrete steps to foster peace and stability in this region by establishing contact with the rising generation of leaders, helping them to obtain the skills of governing and improving their capacity to do so – including in opposition – and setting the outer bounds of legitimate contestation for power. A consensus on good government among the G8 leaders at Deauville, or later among the G20 leaders at the Cannes Summit, will promote the return of these countries to contributing to the global economy, and will benefit everyone. ♦

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