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The revolution will not be cancelled

For the time being, corona has snuffed out mass demonstrations in North Africa and the Middle East. Yet, it might stoke the region's revolutionary flames soon again

Read this article in German.

It was on 19 February – three weeks before the WHO declared the global Covid-19 outbreak to be a pandemic – that the first coronavirus deaths in the Middle East were recorded: two Iranians died of the effects of the virus in the holy city of Qom. In the intervening months, the disease has spread throughout the region, leaving few areas unscathed. From Iran, it reached Lebanon, Syria and Iraq, before making its way to Jordan and then into North Africa. New epicentres were established in Egypt and around the Persian Gulf. By the third week of April, the MENA-countries between Morocco and Iran had almost 250,000 confirmed cases and over 9,000 fatalities, and the number of unrecorded infections is almost certainly far higher.

In the region's urban centres, transmission of the virus has been facilitated by crowded living conditions, dysfunctional administrative structures and inadequate health services; hesitant official reactions have been additional factors in accelerating the spread. In areas that rely on tourism as a primary source of income, travel restrictions were often delayed in order to hold off a hit to the economy for as long as possible. Yet holidaymakers visiting the Red Sea resorts, tourists flying into the Gulf's metropolises and pilgrims to the holy sites of Saudi Arabia were the perfect catalysts for the virus.

To date, more than 73 per cent of the cases documented are clustered around Turkey and Iran, but the effects of the pandemic have made themselves felt throughout the region: tourism has ground to a standstill, capital markets have collapsed and the oil price has plummeted to unprecedented lows. Whole economies are frozen, with only the health services – under-resourced and lacking in personnel after years of neglect and insufficient investment – running at and above full capacity in their efforts to identify, isolate and treat coronavirus patients.

Democratic transition on hold

So in some ways, the challenges the region faces are little different to those in other parts of the world. What is different is that, for some governments in North Africa and the Middle East, the corona crisis is not only unwelcome but offers a window of opportunity, too: after all, if concerts and football games have to be cancelled to stop the spread of the virus, so too do public demonstrations, mass sit-ins and other forms of collective action. The travel bans, prohibitions of public events and range of other restrictions have thus hit civil society hard, putting the brakes on the new-found momentum among protest movements across the region. In early 2020, their mass protests across the region seemed to foreshadow a second Arab Spring; now this potential start of a second wave of democratic transformations is frozen. As if that were not enough, the imperative to slow the rate of infections serves regimes with the perfect pretence to stifle revolutionary movements.

This is not to say that all governments in the region only pretend to care for public health while actually using disease control measures mainly to repress dissent: even in autocracies such as Egypt, investigative research points to a genuine understanding of the issues at play among those in charge. Yet on the whole, the unavoidable decline in the momentum of protests as a result of the restrictions in place is, without a doubt, a not exactly undesirable side-effect when viewed from the perspective of the rulers of many North African and Middle Eastern states (and indeed of some countries elsewhere).

A setback for revolutionary movements

Lebanon is a prime example of this situation. Since October 2019, the country has seen widespread social mobilisation in opposition to the disastrous economic and fiscal policy record of a nepotistic elite: the country was on the brink of bankruptcy, yet its oligarchic structures stood in the way of the required reforms, and so hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets in the space of a few days to demand the resignation of the government. Mobilisation continued at levels unseen since the end of the civil war despite attempts at repression. And when – as a result of the close ties between the two countries and the frequent air connections between Teheran and Beirut – corona arrived from Iran, Lebanon's political class found itself boxed in and clearly on the defensive.

Quite possibly seeing an opportunity to regain the initiative, the government's reaction to the virus was all the more decisive, taking the tiny Mediterranean state to the head of the Middle Eastern pack, as the

Ministry of Education shut schools and universities alongside bars, shopping centres, cinemas, and gyms – several weeks ahead of similar measures in Europe, too. Since mid-March, the army has been patrolling the streets to enforce a strict curfew and under the pretext of fighting the pandemic, the authorities have started taking action against the protest movements. On 27 March, Beirut police broke up the last of the protest camps set up in the mass demonstrations and the subsequent days saw a spike of arrests during collective protests. Now, the demonstrators are – quite plausibly – concerned about the potential for the government to use this prolonged crisis to carve out the space it needs to make limitations on public gatherings and group activities permanent.

As such, it is all the more telling that, in many places, demonstrators have continued protesting in ways which exhibit extremely high standards of social responsibility – often higher standards than those of their respective governments.

Similar concerns are harboured in Iraq, the second of the region's republics to feel the delayed aftershocks of the Arab Spring in October 2019. Following Turkey and Iran, Iraq is the third most affected country in the Middle East. For its caretaker government, in place following several failed attempts to form a new administration, weakened by internal strife and lacking in public support, the corona crisis is a stress test of the first order. When the virus struck, the Iraqi parliament still had not even passed a budget for 2020, having just failed to elect a new prime minister for the second time.

In this context, the authorities could do little more than apply the standard practice for slowing the spread of corona, placing Baghdad and a few other provinces in lock-down and banning domestic travel. These measures had a marked effect on protest movements, yet no significant action has been taken to soften the socio-economic blow dealt by the crisis. So it is hardly surprising that many in Iraq are now worried that the pandemic is being misused to settle political scores. Indeed, using the curfew as a cover, militias have in recent weeks been taking targeted actions against activists: on 5 April, prominent protest figure Umm Abbas lost her life in one of these paramilitary ambushes.

Algeria is another striking instance of the corona crisis being used to place curbs on freedom of speech and the right to free assembly: since 17 March, all forms of protest and rallies have been forbidden. While the Iranian and Turkish authorities have, in view of the bleak state of their overcrowded penitentiary systems, released tens of thousands of prisoners in an effort to prevent the virus from spreading, Algeria has, since the imposition of the lockdown, seen an increase in the number of arrests. Members of the Hirak movement are detained and interrogated at

growing rates; critical journalists and reporters associated with the protest movement are increasingly at risk of being taken into police custody or even sentenced to incarceration. Moreover, and in line with almost all other administrations in the region, the Algerian government has tightened its grip on the domestic media to prevent critical reporting and analysis of the official pandemic response. In Egypt, where a well-respected *Guardian* journalist was stripped of her accreditation for 'inaccurate reporting', the effect of the censorship is particularly obvious.

Off the street and onto the web

Considering the (not so) hidden agenda many governments are pursuing, as they combine sincere attempts to combat Covid-19 with repressive action aimed at shoring up their grip on power, movements in the nascent second Arab Spring find themselves faced with an intractable dilemma. They can, on the one hand, continue their demonstrations. This would, however, contribute to the further spread of a virus, which is already testing overstretched health services to breaking point. Or they can run the risk that their protests lose momentum as the pandemic progresses, leaving the regimes in place to get off the back foot.

As such, it is all the more telling that, in many places, demonstrators have continued protesting in ways which exhibit extremely high standards of social responsibility – often higher standards than those of their respective governments. Indeed, in swathes of the region, regardless of state restrictions protestors withdrew from the streets of their own accord. In full knowledge that the coronavirus can only be contained by a concerted societal effort, several movements are now using their social capital to disseminate reliable information about the disease and to support risk groups or those affected.

In Iraq, for instance, the protest movement – already tangibly weakened following the Soleimani assassination at the beginning of the year – initially judged the risk posed by the pandemic less pressing than that of government incompetence and the growing Iranian influence. But activists changed their opinion in light of the sharp rise in the number of corona deaths in the neighbouring country. In mid-March the activists thus announced that they would be putting their campaign on hold until Covid-19 has been brought under control, starting a drive to increase awareness of social distancing, self-isolation in the event of symptoms and of disinfecting public places. They also used their network to share appeals for solidarity with those in need and to collect donations for the families of those working in the informal sector, who are worst affected by the curfews.

So even if the victory over the virus is mercifully swift, North Africa and the Middle East are facing a turbulent near-term future as the corona induced economic crisis could mutate into a full-blown systemic crisis.

In Lebanon and Algeria, demonstrators drew similar conclusions, focussing their activities on the internet and social media, where they kept up their protests in virtual form using pictures and videos, hashtags, and online petitions as tools. Hirak went so far as to make a political statement out of its decision to stay home, taking the opportunity to underline its sense of responsibility to the Algerian public; the movement's activists switched from marches to a digital health campaign with a clear slogan: 'As a part of the Hirak movement, I am fighting the coronavirus'.

Replacing protest in public places with digital campaigns and initiatives to help those affected – e.g. distributing disinfectant, caring for the sick, setting up helplines for those in isolation – is something which is happening elsewhere in the world, too, and gives grounds to hope that the movements will survive the freeze. In the short term, the pandemic may offer the elites that had come under fire an opportunity to distract from mismanagement and to reprofile themselves as courageous crisis managers. But in the long run, it plays in favour of the protestors, underscoring their demands for competent, responsible and inclusive structures of governance: In a way like few crises before, the corona pandemic is shining a light on inequality in the Arab world, as those who profit from the status quo enjoy high-quality private healthcare and can use their financial reserves to sit out the quarantine while a large proportion of the working population is faced with crumbling health services and economic ruin. In Tunisia, where the Arab Spring began in late 2010, first protests against the curfew have already erupted, as impoverished workers take to the streets chanting 'We'll die of starvation before we catch corona!'

A looming systemic crisis

It was this persistent inequality which, in the months prior to the corona crisis, had led to widespread protests in the region. A generation of young people without jobs and without the prospect of getting on in the world had lost faith in the political class. It is hard to see how the pandemic will do anything but reinforce this lack of trust. Even at this early stage, the virus is causing serious economic disruption whose social consequences governments hamstrung by clientelism and lacking room for fiscal manoeuvre are ill-placed to tackle. A secondary crisis already looms on the horizon: While supply chains and markets will be reactivated and borders reopened, and while much of the working population will return

to work, once the current emergency recedes, economic recovery in the time following the corona pandemic is likely to be forestalled by an enormous growth in private and public debt. Even prior to the pandemic, the debts of countries like Lebanon and Sudan surpassed their gross domestic products. Financial crises had already driven many states in the region to the brink of bankruptcy. Others have long been dependent on credit lines from international financial institutions or can only keep their heads above water with the odd injection of petrodollars from the oil-rich Gulf states.

This worrying situation was only aggravated by the economic shock of the corona crisis. As tourism has dried up as a source of ready foreign exchange and the price for the region's core export products – oil and natural gas – plunge new depths, living costs are rising steeply and local currencies are losing value fast. The corona crisis is accelerating the pace of a sovereign debt crisis, which will in turn wreak havoc with strongly subsidised public services.

So even if the victory over the virus is mercifully swift, North Africa and the Middle East are facing a turbulent near-term future as the corona induced economic crisis could mutate into a full-blown systemic crisis. In the early days following corona, the current restrictions are likely to provoke a political struggle for freedom and equal rights; it won't take long for the question of social justice to follow, either. The revolution will not be cancelled; it has merely been delayed.



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