

## **How to manage a democratic transition after the revolution**

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Elections wreck revolutions. This lesson was learnt the hard way in Lebanon when the massive coalition that gathered on March 14, 2005 to demand “Syria out” drifted away as its many leaders squabbled over parliamentary elections in localised Byzantine politics. In the early days following the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, I made this argument to my colleagues in the leadership of the Cedar Revolution, as well as to the then-US ambassador to Lebanon Jeffrey Feltman and to the Maronite Patriarch Mar Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir. Elections in June, they reasoned, would produce a majority in parliament that would then effect the desired changes.

My point was that the June elections would undermine the momentum and spirit of the revolution underway by drawing apart the inevitably diverse factions challenging a dictatorship, which was led by the Lebanese president at the time, Emile Lahoud, with the support of Syria’s Bashar Al Assad. The fracture occasioned by those elections is still with us, and to date the Cedar Revolution has failed to reach most of its goals.

The divisive propensity that is natural to elections now threatens revolutions everywhere in Arab countries. The dilemma is straightforward: for new leadership to emerge, one needs national elections. In the absence of national elections, a revolution cannot produce a legitimate leadership.

National elections, however, pit the constituencies of the revolution – as diverse as they are disorganised due to a lack of freedom over decades – against each other. Infighting replaces common cause against the dictatorship, and a large number of symbols and practices of the old regime remain as witnessed in both Tunisia and Egypt. Elections lead to conflict and animosities undermining the democratic yearning that

initially coalesced the majority of the population to confront a dictator and force him out.

To square the circle there are two apparent avenues. The first is to integrate as many revolutionary factions as possible into an electoral coalition that would secure a mandate sufficient to form a government and provide wide political and social stability to the country until a democratic process is gradually institutionalised. This approach has been advocated by the leading dissident and former candidate for Egypt's presidency, Ayman Nour.

At a working dinner in Beirut earlier this month, Mr Nour explained his efforts to bring about an electoral coalition that includes the largest number of parties and factions that made the revolution, including the Muslim Brotherhood. Such a coalition would overwhelmingly win the elections, and produce a stable government that could oversee for the coming few years a slow and comprehensive process of the Nile Revolution.

The second avenue is to think in two steps, the first being to hold elections for a constituent or constitutional assembly followed at a second stage by elections for parliament and/or a government and president in the light of a new constitution. Tunisians have adopted this way under the leadership of Professor Ayadh Ashur who has transformed the reform committee he presides over into a committee that is preparing for a constituent assembly by way of national elections to be held in October.

A third way – a combination of aspects of each approach – potentially offers a better result for Middle East revolutions across the board. The formula is that of a nationally elected constituent assembly that would result from a large coalition of the revolutionary groups. Rather than aim for a majoritarian parliament and government that would antagonise the losing factions, a national coalition for a constituent assembly would preserve the unifying spirit of the revolution for a longer period of time.

Naturally, such a coalition is difficult to form as each faction vies for a large number of representatives in the constituent assembly. But the

objective is not a government; it is a constituent assembly formed around the common spirit of nonviolence in the revolution – that is the rejection of dictatorship, the protection of human rights, an end to the repression of nonviolent demonstrations and to military trials, and an enhanced attention to transitional justice, all to be enshrined in a studied and carefully debated constitutional text – thus minimising the risk of counterrevolutionary success or of a factionalised political process.

Governments in place meanwhile would be essentially caretaker or transitional governments that are required only to secure the democratic space for the constituent assembly, which would have a much higher legitimacy than whatever day-to-day government might represent. In a newly free Tripoli, it will take time to erase 42 years of absolute mayhem, and the National Transitional Council must reduce its role to a caretaker government while elections for a constituent assembly are prepared under a coalition bringing together the largest possible oppositional figures to Col Muammar Qaddafi. Such democratic space would have to rely on existing trustworthy and less politicised institutions, especially the judiciary.

This is also true for monarchies in search of popular legitimacy in the absence of a ballot box. The spirit of the Middle East uprisings has also arrived in these countries, most remarkably in Bahrain. Plebiscites and referendums over constitutional texts prepared by obscure and non-representative committees prevailing in these countries are poor expressions of democracy. They will not produce the anticipated result in revolutionary situations where a host of problems need to be rethought in a well-constructed process, rather than in one-liners that conjure up the abhorred spectre of the “99 per cent” elections results of sad dictatorial lore.